

A SCIENTIFCTION NOVEL COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE!

STARTLING STORIES

MAY

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a red sleeveless top, red shorts, and red gloves, is kneeling on a grey, rocky surface. She is holding a futuristic, blue and silver weapon that emits a bright yellow beam of light. The beam is directed at a large, brown, tentacle-like creature that is emerging from a blue, swirling mass. The creature has a long, segmented body and a large, bulbous head. In the background, there are blue, swirling clouds and a small, blue planet with a ring system. The overall scene is set in a space environment.

LANDS OF THE EARTHQUAKE

*An Amazing
Complete Novel
By* HENRY
KUTTNER

THE DISC-MEN OF JUPITER

*A Hall of Fame Novel
By* MANLY WADE WELLMAN

SCIENTIFCTION
AT THE MUSEUM

STARTLING STORIES

MAY 1947



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STARTLING STORIES

Vol. 15, No. 2

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

May, 1947

An Amazing Complete Novel

Lands of the Earthquake

By HENRY KUTTNER

William Boyce, in whose veins flows the blood of crusaders, goes on the quest of a lost memory and a mysterious woman in an odd clime where cities move and time stands motionless!

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Rolf Bromburg leads humanity's first expedition to the outer planets in this brilliant Classic of Sciencefiction reprinted by popular demand

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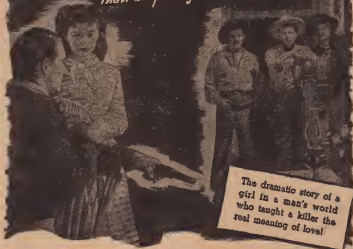
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A REPUBLIC PICTURE



THIS business of arranging efficient (which means safe) human transport faster than the speed of sound is proving to be quite a problem for scientists, engineers and flyers alike. Since young de Havilland test-flew one of his own company's experimental ships into oblivion over the Thames estuary, none of the pilots now engaged in trial flights are anxious to pull the string and let her rip.

The big hitch seems to be that when things go wrong at near-sonic speeds, there is no way of undoing the damage in time to avoid destruction. And no one yet has devised a means of escape from a hunk of high-powered metal which flies through the air at more than 650 miles per hour.

Although rewards as high as \$50,000 have been posted for the first successful supersonic speed-flights, to date there is no line-up of daredevil pilots nudging each other out of the way to grab this comfortable wad of cash.

After all, you can't take it with you.

The First Rocket Plane

For the moment, our one publicized hope of achieving such humanly piloted speed seems to rest in the Army's Bell XS-1, the first of our rocket planes, which managed to hit about one-third of its projected 1,700 miles-per-hour velocity on its first flight, when released from under a B-29.

However, the XS-1 is, all in all, a very orthodox looking airplane, with wings, forward cockpit, rudder and elevators like every other plane save the flying wing designed since the early days of World War One.

Somehow, we can't help feeling that something new has got to be added—and added to the basic concept of flight design. After all, humanity didn't conquer speeds of more than thirty miles per hour with a horse—it took the steam engine to make such travel feasible, to say nothing of safe.

Supersonic Projectiles

To date, the only supersonic projectiles man has created are cannon shells and rock-

ets—with the mighty German V-2 rocket leading the way. Unfortunately no man has yet survived travel in a high speed rocket or shell. We expect the human projectiles so beloved by carnival and circus customers, because they have not yet traveled fast enough to pierce the net that catches them.

So it seems a safe bet that supersonic travel, when it comes, will be accomplished in more of a rocket designed for safe landing than an orthodox plane with rocket attachments. Or perhaps it will be something like Frank R. Stockton's littlest giant and tallest dwarf—both of which turned out to be ordinary men. Perhaps the key is something exceedingly simple whose very availability has defeated so far the efforts of our scientists and engineers to discover it.

But supersonic travel must come and therefore will come. For only through such travel can man attain release from the gravity of Earth which is the pathway to sorely needed new frontiers—the Moon, the Planets, perhaps the stars themselves.

Meanwhile, the harrier remains as an opening challenge!

OUR NEXT ISSUE

IT WAS indeed a curious circumstance.

Every scientist who got on the track of the true causes of the non-cosmic Lawson radiation fell victim to amnesia which destroyed his value as a scientist. It was generally felt, after a number of such failures, that the radiation itself was in some way dangerous and that its investigation should be halted.

But the last of the scientists to lose his memory recovered—and recovered with his recollection of things past a knowledge so fearsome that, when he attempted to explain it to his colleagues, he was deemed a schizophrenic.

Spies from a distant galaxy were behind the Lawson radiation, spies whose purpose was ultimately to destroy the Earth before its expanding science could reach out toward them through the universe. And so cleverly did they cover their tracks that only through study of the Lawson radiation could their

presence be suspected at all.

The battle of wits and weapons heretofore unknown on Earth which developed was one of the tensest and most deadly ever fought—with continued existence of the Solar System the prize at stake.

This new novel, **KINGDOM OF THE BLIND** by George O. Smith, should come close to hitting the SS high spot for the year—in a year whose high spots are more altitudinous and more frequent than ever before in SS history. Better climb aboard.

Other features will include a Hall of Fame superclassic, the memorable **LIFE DETOUR** by Dr. David H. Keller, and a quota of far-above-average short stories by an increasingly brilliant cast of staff writers now approaching their postwar best. The July **STARTLING STORIES** should be peak issue in a peak year.

ETHERGRAMS

WELL, the final step in reconversion of TEV is here—with elimination of that certain non-commissioned officer (a three-striper to be exact) who once ran rampant through these pages, complete with BEMlins and strange ethospheric brew. After approximately six years and three different authors the gag (save in the case of very new readers) were a little too thin. And wild space lingo, unintelligible in most cases to the writer himself, covered a multitude of sins.

However, lest certain of you more temerous correspondents think that the author of this pillar has lain down and died, we wish to make certain facts known now. What some of you called the Surge's humor is still on tap—that is if his particular brand of waggery passes as humor. Vitriol will still be thrown at those who have the rashness to insult us. And anyone who writes us in doggerel will get same right back in his face. Beware of bad puns henceforth as in the past!

And now for the letters, of which the supply is as copious as in all recent issues (thanks, gals and fellows). Which gives rise to one additional statement. Some of you old timers miss the chance to sound off at great length in your missives and be reprinted in full.

But the days when we could run twelve to fifteen letters and be fairly representative of the bulk of our correspondents is past, it seems. Recently, both in SS and in our companion, **THRILLING WONDER STORIES**,

[Turn page]

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the bi-monthly number of letters received tripled itself.

It was only fair, since so many more of you took the trouble to write us, that we make room for more of you in the column. So, it's shorter letters now, and more of them. We think the fair-minded amongst you will agree with this method of handling our bulging mail sack.

And now, let's get to it.

BRIEF FROM MERRIE ENGLAND

by P. Reilly

Dear Sir: I read your issues of 88 whenever I can get them. They are rather difficult to obtain over here in England. However, I assure you that your stories are all OK and I truly do appreciate them. I only wish we had some English magazines along the same lines—37 Ritching's Avenue, Walthamstow, London E 17, England.

Thanks, P. Reilly. Before the recent world fracas there were a number of British STF magazines, some of which must be in process of current revival. You might be pleasantly surprised if you keep an eye cocked on your newstands. Cheers!

ANSWER—YES

by Chad Oliver

Dear Sir: Since the January STARTLING was primarily concerned with the efforts of one Edmond Hamilton, it would seem logical to start our little analysis on The Star of Life. Right? To arms, then.

Hamilton had enough material in his novel for a thousand Homeric epics, but, alas, this number was substantially reduced by Brother Edmond. Or should I say, oblique?

Hamilton has produced some fine work in the past, and that's all that kept me going through the first seven chapters. They were pretty sad. Things picked up along about Chapter Seven, as Hamilton hit his stride, and the novel was well-done from that point on. I like his tear-jerking endings—nobody can write them quite like our World Warcker Hamilton.

The best story in the book took trip was Leinster's Friends. It had just as much significance as the Hamilton opus, and its simplicity was very effective. Murray Leinster turns out these gems with astonishing rapidity.

Whitley's Frontier's Tale was also a fine short, what is this, anyway—a new era dawning? If so, congratulations! After all the space-irate shorts ("Look! Out there! It's Black Burial, terror of the spaceways! Oh, darling—") this is sheer ecstasy.

The Hall of Fame Clinic wasn't. May I again suggest Clark Ashton Smith's Immortals of Mercury?

As for the cover, . . .

Quoth the fan in the sportsbook door,
Will this go on . . . forevermore?

The Ether Vibrates as usual. I mean, it's good. Very. (Nevel sentence construction, what?) Never, NEVER edit a Snary letter. He is well on his way toward revolutionizing the English (I think it's English) language. Do? I thought I'd laugh.

I trust that the lamented Raymond Hans has slithered back under his rock by now. How anyone with a name like that has the nerve to write nifty letters is beyond me. He is a one-man punner's paradise. If only Joe Kennedy were around.

There was so much verse this trip that I was tempted to send you my masterpiece—O Would I Were A Warwolf! But I have some human feeling left. Wherefor, with which, and thus speaking, and "sniling tremulously up at you through my teary", (thank, Edmond) I bid you all a fond farewell—3323 Bonham Terrace, Austin, Texas.

Quoth the editor from his chair
You cut that out, Chad Oliveire. . .

Seriously or otherwise, aren't you a little rough on poor Edmond? After all, he doesn't pretend to be a Steinbeck—but he is a darned good craftsman, tear jerking and all. Just to please you, we follow with an un-edited Sneary at once—or pronto as Sneary would probably say. Send in the Werewolf opus any time. We'll cut h—l out of it.

BUENOS TARDES!

by Rick Sneary

Buenos días, señor! —Just a few words about the Jan. SS. Which I'm happy to say was really very good. Even the cover was QR. Bergey really did a good job this time. A nice dark background and even three rocket (7) ships. Of course the pic didn't match the story, but I have turned that you can't expect to much, verdad?

Star of Life was a little better than the average. Hamilton pulled a nice twist by letting the heroin die. I am not in favor of it as a rule, but with such a formula type story it made a neat ending.

Venus Mines, Inc. was the best SF story you have had since I have been reading SS. (Not counting "The Martian Odyssey" which of course is in a class by itself) I wish you would tell from which issue the story is from. I would personal be very interested to know this.

The two short stories were better than 'very good'. I am very happy to see that SS is reading the hard-writing on the wall and turning more to this type of story. In which the human emotions rather than physical action play the leading role. But human reaction to an even cosmic event has and always will be of interest. So let's have more of them.

And now a few words to Mr. Raymond Hass. Sir: You have made a number of good points. And from the view of a writer you are quite wise. But you also show a like of understanding of the human mind. First of all fans are a different type than the average. I don't mean smart or brainy. They just think differently. Without doubt 99 per cent of them are helpless egoists.

But as a whole we are also a clearer thinking and more minded on a lot of things. We write such letter to the prof, not really to find fault, but in an effort to help the editor. As a person I doubt that few fans expect to do anything. But as a group and in mass we resent the thousands of people who do read sf but haven't got what it takes to be writers.

Sure we like to see our name in print. Who wouldn't. I'll bet you got a little thrill out of seeing your name Mr. Hass.

Fans are a lot more serious minded than you would think. They appear like a lot of five year olds acting up to say. Well Mr. Hass do you, or the Union belong to worry about the 3rd and LAST world war? Or do you in your small way try to help such things as Federation of Atomic Scientists? I doubt it. You would be very surprised I'm sure if you could read some letters written to other fan by the same fans you speak of.

There are of course exceptions, a lot of the shorter and duller letters are written by people who are not really fans. Such people as you that either wish to praise or deride the mag for something and to see their name in print.

It would seem pretty obvious that editors have found that it pays in some way. By the feeling of the letters a editor can keep ahead on the readers pulse. I, as I'm sure any wide awake fan, do not expect that Earl Bergey will get sacked just because I say that a cover smells. I say it because I believe it does alright. But the reason I say it is in the hope that Bergey will try to better the next time. (Which he does now and then.)

I'm sure Mr. Hass has read the Sargent piece for better letters. And I for one hope he gets them. And there is a old saying in fandom that I would like to leave with you. If you don't like the way it's done, get in and do it better.—2362 Santa Ana St., South Gate, Calif.

Okay, Rick. Thanks a lot for rushing to our mutual defense against that dastard of

(Continued on page 88)

To People who want to write but can't get started

Do you have that constant urge to write but the fear that a beginner hasn't a chance. Then listen to what the former editor of Liberty said on this subject:

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JACK PLAYED IN LUCK WHEN...



20 MINUTES LATER





Boyce knew before he touched her the how her strong soft body would feel in his arms. (CHAP. X)

Lands of the Earthquake

By HENRY KUTTNER

William Boyce, in whose veins flows the blood of crusaders, goes on the quest of a lost memory and a mysterious woman in an odd clime where cities move and time stands motionless!

CHAPTER I

The Crystalline Window

WILLIAM BOYCE lost a year out of his life when he was thirty. One August morning he was walking south of the library on Fifth Avenue, past the stone lions that guard the broad

steps, and then suddenly he was in a hospital bed in Bellevue, one year later. A patrolman had found him lying unconscious on one of Central Park's broad lawns. Boyce came out of Bellevue into Hell.

Amnesia was nothing new. Psychiatrists told Boyce that under treatment his memory would probably return. In the meantime, it would be best to slip back into his familiar

An Amazing Complete Full-Length Novel

grooves of life and pick up where he had so abruptly left off a year ago.

It sounded easy. Boyce tried it. But he had lost all interest in his classes at the university. He was haunted. He developed an obsession. He knew that he had to find out what had happened to the lost year or he could not go on.

Occasionally fleeting flashes of memory would come to him—a man's swarthy, moustached face, a quiet voice he seemed to know intimately, speaking sometimes in a language that was familiar and yet strange.

Once, in Classics, Boyce heard that tongue spoken—it was a reading from a medieval manuscript in old French, the French of six hundred years ago. But he understood it like his native tongue. That was very strange, he thought. . . .

Then there was a memory of dark figures, robed, moving with an eerie liteness that made Boyce shake suddenly all over with sheer terror. That memory always snapped shut almost instantly, as if his mind would allow him only a glimpse. At such times he wondered whether the truth about his lost year might not drive him insane with sheer panic.

But something still drew him restlessly to that lost time. He thought that it was linked somehow with the crystal he had found in his pocket upon his release from Bellevue. It was not a large crystal, but it was cut in a way he had never seen before. Some of its facets were concave, others were convex. It was perfectly transparent. And he felt—uncomfortable—when he did not have it in his pocket. He could not have said why.

Time passed—a year, full of restlessness and uncertainty. More and more of his days he spent wandering through the city, searching and searching, with no knowledge of what he sought. He was beginning to drink—too much, and more than too much.

The district near the East River, far south of mid-town, seemed to have the deepest attraction for him. Sometimes, hazy with whiskey, he would roam the silent streets, his hand in his pocket clenched on the crystal that seemed cold against his palm with a chill of its own, never taking warmth from his touch. Louder and louder, more and more insistently, that silent voice from his lost year was calling him.

The man's dark face—that among many things floated before him more often than before. It was not the face itself that mat-

tered, he began to realize. The face was more a key to some secret than anything of intrinsic value. And it was not even a living face, but a pictured one. . . .

One day he saw that face in reality. He followed the man at a distance, through streets that grew familiar. . . . At last he was left standing in front of an ancient, narrow brownstone house by the East River—indeed, its rear windows must have looked on the river. As he watched the man unlock the door and enter the house, he knew, without knowing why, that this was the place which had been drawing him for so long.

The muscles on his jaw tightened under the stubble of his beard. He crossed the street, mounted the low flight of steps, and stood waiting, not quite daring to ring the bell. Then, scowling, he thrust his finger forward.

AFTER a moment the door opened. Blind wings of panic beat in Boyce's chest. He thrust forward, and the man facing him gave ground, his face darkening with suspicion.

Boyce's gaze went beyond him. He knew this dark long hall somehow, as he knew the stairway that went up into gloom, and the other one that led down.

"What do you want?" the man said sharply. "Who're you looking for?"

Boyce stared at that strangely familiar face. "I—my name's Boyce," he said, hesitating. "You don't . . . remember me?"

"Boyce?" Sharp eyes searched his. Again the quick suspicion flared. "Heck, no! Listen, mister—just what do you want? I don't know you."

Boyce felt his throat dry. "Two years ago—I've changed a lot, probably, but not so much that you can't remember me."

"I never saw you before in my life." "How long have you lived here?"

"Ten years," the man said. "Except—"

"I know this house!" Boyce said desperately. "Over there's the living-room, with the fireplace." He moved so quickly that the other was left behind. In a second Boyce was through a curtained archway and staring around a cluttered, gloomy room—a room he knew!

His eyes went to the fireplace and over it. There hung a framed tinted photograph, nearly life-size, of the dark man.

It was the photograph he remembered—



Behind his tiger-beast, leaning on the south, the hazzamen came in his tiger-striped garments. (CHAP. XIV)

not the man! He whirled.

"I tell you, I know this house! I'm certain of it!" Again the inexplicable urgency tugged at him, drawing him . . . where?

The dark man said, "Look—I said I lived here for ten years, except when I leased the place once. But I leased it to somebody named Holcomb, not Boyce."

"Holcomb? Who was he?"

"I never saw the guy. My lawyer handled the whole deal. I moved out and a year later I moved back in. Never saw Holcomb. But that was the name."

Boyce stared, trying to find some light in this deeper mystery. Abruptly he beaded for the door and out into the hall. Behind him the dark man said, "Hey!" but Boyce didn't stop. He knew where he was going.

As he went down the stairs his unwilling host called after him.

"There's nothing down there! It's all empty, in the basement rooms. Mister, I'm gonna call the—"

But Boyce was gone. Heightened expectancy made his breath come faster. What he would find here he did not know, but he felt that he was on the right track at last. That inexplicable call was thrilling in his blood, urging him, commanding him to do something he should have done long ago.

He went through a door and the room beyond was small and dusty. The splintering board walls had no windows and the only light filtered dimly past Boyce as he stood staring. It was like any other square empty room—and yet somehow Boyce sighed, a deep sigh of curious satisfaction.

This was it. This was the room. It was here that . . . what?

He stepped out on the dust of the floor. It was so empty a room that the one thing in it struck his gaze forcibly once he was inside. On a shelf on the wall a cheap glass candlestick stood and in it a guttered candle. Only the wax of the candle looked a little strange. It was almost clear wax, a delicate blue-green like the sky at evening, so nearly transparent that you could see the shadow of the wick through its half-melted floor.

Footsteps sounded overhead. Boyce went over to the candle and touched it with a hesitant forefinger.

"I remember this," he whispered. "I've seen this before. But the room. . . It is and it isn't. It never was empty this way, and dirty. Somehow I don't think it was. But it looks . . . right, even now."

It was too gloomy to make out details. He snapped a match into flame and then lit the candle.

The room—it should have been a little different. Richness. Tapestries. Jewels. Silk stuff. But it should have looked exactly like this, too. How—

The wick kindled and bloomed up in a slow golden oval.

Boyce drew his breath in a long gasp.

"Something's missing," he said softly. "This!"

The crystal he had carried for two years was cold in his fingers as he lifted it in a gesture that was virtually a conditioned reflex. He held it before the candle and the flame struck sparks from the facets of the stone. The room for an instant was full of shooting fireflies as the lights danced wildly on floor and walls and ceiling. Boyce's hand shook.

He remembered, now, out of that lost year, how he had held up this crystal before, while she—she . . .

THERE were suddenly shadows upon the walls. Shadows that moved and grew stronger as Boyce gazed. A strange, dim richness was gathering and growing all around him, a dance of shadow-tapestries blowing like ghosts in a ghostly wind whose draft he could not feel. Dim jewels flashed from the unreal folds.

The bare boards still rose around him, gray and splintered and dusty, but a clothing of tapestried hangings was taking shadow-form upon the walls, silently rustling in that silent, unreal breeze. Thicker and thicker the shadows grew. Now the boards were half-hidden behind their ghostly richness, like the bare bones of a skeleton that gathered ephemeral flesh about it out of a phantom-world.

With every flicker of the candle-flame the tapestries grew richer and more real. The jewels caught the light more clearly. There was a rug like thick, soft dust underfoot, opulently patterned. Overhead the ceiling billowed with dim silks like the webs of fabulous spiders, woven into flowery garlands. And yet behind all the richness he could still see the naked ribs of the room, gray boards, dust, desolation.

Boyce held the crystal to the light, his hand now steady. And the candle flame, falling through it in broken refractions, cast a web of light upon the one surface of the

wall that was not shadow-hung. But no longer did the bare boards show there. Where the light fell a crystalline pattern formed upon the wall, intricately woven in designs as delicate and clear as the pattern of a snowflake.

It seemed to brighten as he watched. The ghostly tapestries blew about them, the silken garlands overhead billowed, but the pattern on the wall held steady and grew deeper and more brilliant, deeper and deeper. Light poured powerfully from the flame through the crystal, was strengthened as through a lens and sank like some tangible substance into the wall beyond. It permeated the wall, dissolved it, etched the pattern of the crystal as if with some strange, bright acid that set its mark forever upon the surface where the light-pattern lay.

The wind blew through the pattern. . . . Boyce was aware of it dimly. The tapestries blew both ways from that delicately etched design upon the wall, as if the light had dissolved an opening into the outer air and a breeze from another world blew through it.

It must be a breeze from another world, for he could not feel its breath.

Suddenly his hand began to shake. This was impossible. This could not be happening. It was hallucination, alcohol-born, and he would waken in a moment in some dingy booth in a bar with the noise of tin-pan music in his ears and crowds moving about him—not with these silent tapestries that looked so frighteningly familiar upon the walls.

His hand shook—yes. But the light upon the wall did not shake. Unbelievably, he lowered the crystal slowly. The light held steady. He closed his fingers about the crystal—it was colder than ever now, with a chill that sank into his hand—and dropped the smooth, shining thing back into his pocket, his eyes still unwaveringly fixed upon the wall.

The beautiful, shining pattern was a refraction no longer. It was real. It was a great glittering design of crystal, cold and perfect as a snowflake, and as fragile. He knew it was fragile. How he knew it he was not sure.

But it was the only real thing in the room. The bare bones of the walls, the dust and the splintered boards were not there at all. The tapestries were more real than he, blowing in a scented breeze from the crystalline wall. But neither tapestries nor the unfelt

breeze had the compelling reality of the pattern.

There was something—he fought to grasp it.

She had gone before him. That was it! That was what had haunted him for so long, driving him along devious paths to this moment and this sorcerous room.

He could see her as she had stood here months ago—a moment ago—time lost all meaning as he remembered. But he could not see her face. She had stood with her back to him in this rich, gleaming room, a silhouette against the great shining pattern on the wall. A tall silhouette, lovely, dangerous. . . .

Light flashed in his mind. He saw as if a shutter had snapped open the way she turned for one brief instant and glanced across her shoulder into his eyes.

She had smiled. He saw the red lips curve, and the white flash of her teeth and the brilliance of her eyes, violet fire in the richly-tinted face. Danger was in her smile, and bright, blinding color. An invitation and a threat. And then she had stepped forward and—and . . .

Yes, it had been invitation. It might have happened a year ago—it might have happened only the moment before this. Time meant nothing to her. She meant terror and something worse than terror. She meant the thing his mind had gone blank to shut away forever. But where she went, he must follow.

He had completely forgotten everything but that.

Blindly he stepped forward. The pattern upon the wall loomed above him, exquisitely etched in infinities of tiny crystalline panes. Beyond it he could see dim things moving. He did not care. He thought they meant danger, but he did not care. The bright, laughing, terrible face was in his eyes like a flash of light that blotted out all other vision. He saw nothing now, but her.

By instinct he put up both arms to protect his face—and plunged blindly through the glass.

He heard it splinter around him with a sound like thousands of tiny musical bells tinkling. He felt their sharp edges cutting through his sleeves. He felt a gust of keen, cold air, and then the world failed beneath his feet and he was falling.

After that he remembered nothing at all.

CHAPTER II

The Huntsman

SOMEONE was laughing. It sounded far away. Boyce opened his eyes and looked up dazedly at a drift of blue-grey mist floating before his face. Beyond and above it he could see more mist, layer upon layer hanging in the dim cool air, and above them—mountains?—great walls of rock that vanished into the fog.

The laughter came again. It was not far away—it was close by, and there was a snarl in it. He sat up stiffly, wondering where he was.

There was clear glass, broken into glittering fragments, lying all around him. Boyce remembered.

But now he lay upon a shelf of stone, cold and a little damp, and behind him when he twisted to look was a grey rocky wall rising sheer into clouds. Window? There was none. Yet he must have emerged here, upon this ledge, for here lay the splintered glass of his passage through the pattern. Whatever door he had come through was closed behind him now.

The ledge was narrow. To right and left it led downward over a trail along the face of the cliff. Mist floated to hide what lay below. But before him, far away over the drifting mist, a great walled city lifted its towers. And it was a curiously shaped city. He blinked through the dim air that lay between.

Clouds formed and tore apart and re-formed over the whole valley floor, but the city's roofs rose too high to be hidden. He could see that some of them were made of jagged rock, and some of clear glass. Many were of bright stuff like the roofs of tents, striped and patterned or of clear, glowing colors that billowed a little in the wind.

It was dim in the valley, and he could see lights burning among the roofs. Some of them came brilliantly through the crystal; some glowed like lanterns through the colored stuff of the tented towers. The city looked like a carnival alight with festive lamps. But there was something about it that he did not like. Was it memory, he wondered, or something more deeply rooted than memory—instinct itself warning him of what lay

within those high walls?

Beyond them the mists rolled again over the far reaches of the valley, and beyond the mists were more mountains. They swept up and up, peak upon jagged peak, range upon rising range, until the low clouds hid them.

But upon one of the foremost peaks a gigantic castle lay. Boyce narrowed his eyes against the haze and the distance, and tried in vain to make out the shape of the building. The mists between thinned for a moment, like the curtains of a stage drawing back.

He saw the great crenelated towers, with a scarlet banner like a tongue of flame blowing tremendously from the topmost height of the great donjon-keep. It was a castle such as he had seen often enough in old pictures, a mighty fortified heap of walls and towers, strangely familiar in this—this dream, this incredible land of mist and mountains.

Then the clouds rolled in again and the castle with its banner like a flame was blotted out as if memory itself had revealed it for a moment and then forgotten again, or as if the mists of the past had awalled forever those anachronistic towers.

Boyce got slowly to his feet.

Not until then did the laughter come again, deep now, with amusement and a snarl that underlay the amusement.

Boyce turned. The sound seemed to come from above, and after a moment the mists drew back and he saw the one who laughed. Standing on a ledge a little way up the face of the rock, with mist swirling around him, a tall man watched him. Boyce stared incredulously.

At first glance he could not be sure the man was not actually furred like a tiger, for his long, muscular limbs and lithe body were tawny and striped with a fur of velvety sheen. But the man's grinning face was pale, and his black hair under the tiger-skin hood lay smooth.

He was leaning back against a leather strap he held with both hands, and Boyce could see dimly the surge of sleek bodies around his knees. The strap was a leash, but the creatures he held upon it were invisible in the fog.

The tiger-striped man's lip lifted in a smile like a snarl, and he took one hand from the leash to make a signal to Boyce—intricate, swift motions of the fingers that were blurred to the sight. About his knees the leashed animals surged instantly into activity, and the man laughed fiercely and seized the

strap again, wrestling with his pack. But his eyes were questioning upon Boyce.

He waited, struggling with his beasts. The smile faded. He made the quick, cabalistic gesture again, again fought with his pack to quiet it as he waited. This time he scowled, and the scowl was scarcely fiercer than the smile had been.

Boyce lifted both hands, palm out, in the universal gesture of peace. It was all he could do. He had no answer for the mysterious sign, though dimly he felt he should know what the answer was.

LAUGHTER leaped into the other man's face, instant murderous delight, as if this failure was what he had longed for. Boyce thought for the fraction of a second that he saw recognition in the pale, dangerous countenance above him. He thought the man knew him, had hoped for the chance at enmity and laughed now in terrible delight because the chance had come.

The laughter swelled to a roar, triumphant, with a tiger snarl in the sound, and the man shouted out a deep halloo like a huntsman calling to his pack. One striped, tawny arm flung out in a gesture of warning. He was motioning Boyce to run. He was pointing down the narrow trail toward the valley, and the unseen beasts leaped about his knees, almost free of the loosened leash.

Boyce turned uncertainly, bewilderment fogging his mind. Everything had happened too suddenly, and he was not yet sure at all that he was not asleep and in a dream where a tiger-striped nightmare warned him to flee from snarling nightmares tugging at their leash. He did not like the thought of running. He did not—

With one last halloo the Huntsman slipped the strap. Over the lip of rock Boyce saw smooth bodies pouring down at him, five, six, seven sleekly furred beasts as large as mastiffs and as lithe as serpents. One lifted an almost human face to snarl at him.

It was a beautiful, demented face, half-tiger, half-cat—the strange semi-human countenance of animal faces in medieval tapestries. But the beast was neither cat nor dog. It was something he had never seen before. Circe's beasts might have had such faces.

He turned and ran.



The trail was steep. Mist blew around him as he plunged downward, never sure that the next step might not carry him over some unseen abyss. Behind him the Huntsman's laughter rang wildly through the fog, the cliffs echoing it back until the whole valley seemed to laugh with him. From the beasts came a low, deep snarling, but no other sound. They might be far behind, they might be already at his heels. Boyce did not dare turn to look.

The steep trail curved around the face of the rock and leveled slowly toward the valley floor. Stumbling, panting, dizzy with incredulity, Boyce ran on.

When the ground was level underfoot and the drifting mist revealed to him that he had come at last to the base of the cliffs, he paused for a moment to get his bearings. There was silence behind him. Even the Huntsman's laughter was quiet now and no snarling rolled through the fog.

He stood on a sandy plain among clumps of low-growing shrubs. Far off a glow of faint color staining the mist told him where the city lay, but he was not sure at all that he dared seek out that city. He needed time to think, to search his mysteriously closed memory for things he so desperately needed now to know.

Where was he—in what impossible land? What did he want here? For he had come through the crystal window in answer to a compelling urge toward—something. An urge to follow—her—to find her? That nameless, all but faceless woman who wore an iron crown and whose very memory was like a chain to draw him after her wherever she might go.

Where had he known her? What had she been to him? Why did the shiver of recollected danger ripple over him whenever he let her memory float back into his mind? He had no answers to these or any other questions. He only knew he was lost in the fog of an incredible land and he did not think he dared seek out that city which was its only familiar landmark.

The Sorcerers' City. Its name came into his mind blindly. It was an evil city, full of strange enchantments and stranger men and women. He felt a sudden urge to look upon it, and struck out on impulse through the fog toward a rise of ground he saw a little distance away.

From the eminence the city was clearer, veiled and unveiled by the constant, silent

drifting of blue-grey clouds. Enigmatically the great walls rose, enclosing their clusters of lighted towers, their crystal roofs, their tented canopies that glowed like lanterns from the lights within.

Through the mists a sound came faintly to him. He turned. Far away, winding through the cloudy plain, he saw a procession coming toward the city. There was a curious darkness over the long, wavering column. Tiny lamps gleamed through it and the sound of bells rose and fell as the procession wound its way through the fog. He was near enough to make out a little of those who walked in the line. . . .

Boyce had no recollection of what happened next. He only knew he was sitting on the sandy ground, his face in his hands, while waves of sickness receded slowly as he sat there. He was shaking all over.

He remembered then that he had seen those—those beings—before. Somewhere in her company. As to what they looked like, what they were, his conscious mind had no recollection. He thought he would never know consciously. They were too terribly alien to all that is human. He only knew that they walked upright like men, yet were not men, and that such revulsion went through him at the very thought of them that his mind blanked wholly out. . . .

WHEN he heard the laughter of the Huntsman in the fog, he was almost glad. He got up unsteadily. The dark procession with its lights and bells had vanished into the city and the mist was empty now. The Huntsman laughed again, nearer at hand, and on the heels of his laughter rang out the first cry Boyce had heard from the Huntsman's pack—a high, shivering scream that made his hair prickle at the roots.

He ran.

This time the hunt was after him in earnest. Twice he heard the pack snuffing almost at his very heels, and the thin, clear screaming of their voices was never long silent in the fog. He ran without direction or purpose for what seemed an endless time, with the sandy plain spinning by featurelessly underfoot. He only knew he must not go near the city and those who had entered it.

Gradually it began to dawn upon him that the Huntsman was deliberately herding him. For the pack gave him breathing-spaces. At intervals the Huntsman's halloo would ring through the mist and the screaming

would die away, and Boyce would fling himself full-length upon the damp sand and go limp with exhaustion.

If they meant to pull him down, they could have done so a dozen times in the hours upon hours that the hunt lasted. They were herding him in some one general direction, for some unfathomable reason of the Huntsman's own.

Now the ground began to rise in jagged foothills, and Boyce knew he was coming again to mountains. The pack was close behind him. He panted up a steep slope, hearing the voice of the Huntsman and the shuddering screams of the beasts echoing hollowly through the fog.

Then suddenly the ground before him dropped away in a sheer cliff. He paused and looked frantically about. If the Huntsman had driven him deliberately to this spot, then perhaps it was with no other purpose than to trap him more easily for the kill. For he could not go on or go back.

There was a new sound in the fog. A dull, rhythmic clapping that was oddly familiar. Boyce strained his eyes toward it, trying to quiet his painful gasping. But the fog hid the source of the noise and distorted its sound.

A clear, shivering scream from close behind him made Boyce swing around. Out of the greyness a low, lithe shape took form, lifting a snarling face to stare at him. Another and another behind it moved soundlessly forward, like creatures in a dream.

The clapping was louder now. Abruptly the Huntsman's voice rang out in a high, summoning shout. The beautiful, snarling beasts hesitated. The Huntsman shouted again, and abruptly the pack was gone. Mist closed around them and they vanished like nightmares as they had come.

The Huntsman's laughter rang out once more, mocking, edged with that inhuman snarl. Then silence.

The rhythmic, half-metallic noise came on. Boyce turned.

Out of the fog that rolled back like a curtain from its shoulders, a huge black charger paced. Upon it rode a man—Boyce's eyes widened—a man who had ridden straight out of a lost century.

Chain-mail, glistening with moisture, hung in faintly ringing folds upon his great body. A conical helmet with metal-mesh hanging from it framed a harsh face in which eyes of pale blue stared unwinkingly at Boyce. A

sword swung at the knight's waist.

Another enemy, Boyce thought. He glanced back into the fog, but there was no trace of the Huntsman or his pack.

CHAPTER III

Earthquake

THE mounted man said something. Boyce was stunned to find he could understand the language. Not easily, but it was the old French, the tongue spoken by Frenchmen six hundred years ago. The words and inflection were archaic, garbled—but understandable.

"I am a friend," Boyce said slowly, carefully. "I come in peace." But his tense muscles did not relax. If the knight charged, perhaps he could dodge aside and somehow wrench the man from the saddle.

"If you ran from the Huntsman, you are no friend of the City dogs," the knight said, his harsh mouth relaxing a trifle. "You may come in peace with me—at least. Where is your home?"

Boyce hesitated. What would modern place-names mean to this archaic figure?

"Another land," he said at random. "Far from here, I think."

The blue eyes widened.

"Beyond the mountains? Or—not a land of blue sky and a bright sun? Not a land named—Normandy?"

Still Boyce hesitated. The knight leaned forward in his saddle.

"By your garments you are no man of this haunted world. And you speak our tongue. By the Rood, stranger—answer! Do you know Paris and Rome? Byzantium? Answer! What world do you come from?"

"I know Paris and Rome, yes," Boyce said, through his amazement. "But I do not understand—"

The knight clapped his gauntleted hand to his thigh.

"Oh, by all the gods! Now if you were belot to the Huntsman or servant of Satanus himself, I'd take you to Kerak with me! Up—up, man! The peck may return, or other dangers may threaten. We ride a perilous patrol on these marches. Up, I say!"

A mailed hand gripped Boyce's. The

American was swung up, finding a seat behind the knight. The great charger, well trained, scarcely stirred until the armored man spoke a word. Then the horse cantered forward, picking its way delicately through the fog.

"I am Godfrey Morel—Godfrey Long-shanks they call me," came the hard, firm voice. "Not in my memory has any man come here from the lands of the cross. We were the last. Dear beaven, how my soul has sickened and lusted for a breath of clean wind from Normandy!

"Even the Turk sirocco, hell-hot as it was, would have been grateful, instead of the perfumed stink of this abode of Satanas! Spy or traitor you may be—we can learn that later. But first you will tell me how the world moves—whether we still hold Antioch, and if the Red Lion still leads his Seljuk Turks against our armies."

About to answer, Boyce paused as an elbow jolted into his ribs.

"Silence now, for a while," Godfrey Morel said softly. "Kerak is under siege. It is always under siege, but the fight grows hotter of late. We must ride warily. And in silence."

The war-horse paced on through the thickening mists. Boyce's throat was dry. Byzantium? Antioch? More than six hundred years had rolled over old Earth since the banners of the Crusaders flaunted on the ramparts of Antioch!

Boyce breathed deeply. This was no stranger or more fantastic than the fantastic questions that seethed in his brain. This world was not Earth—he knew that without any question. The crystal gateway through which he was smashed had led him into . . . what? Her world, yes.

"But what and where? He knew it did not matter. Enough that it was here—the girl he could neither forget nor remember, whose image was a scar upon his memory. But for the rest, his questions must go unanswered a while longer.

Godfrey Morel's armor creaked and rang. Beneath them the great war-horse's ponderous gait rocked them both to the same rhythm. Himself, and a man who asked after Antioch and the fate of battles six hundred years lost and won. He must not think now of Godfrey Long-shanks' enigma. His brain was dizzy already with unanswered questions.

The mists blew apart before them and Boyce saw, high on a crag, the towers and

bastions of the great grey castle he had glimpsed across the valley. The crimson banner streamed from its keep-height. Briefly through his mind went the wonder that he had come so straight for it. Was that the Huntsman's doing? And if it was, why?

Before him in the saddle he saw Godfrey's mighty mailed back go rigid. He heard the Crusader's caught breath. Then a deep-throated shout made the mist echo around them.

"Look—look at hell opening again!" roared Godfrey.

The horse beneath them staggered. No—not the horse, but the earth itself. Boyce saw a long swell of sandy ground swiftly rising as if the plain breathed. Between them and the castled heights of the mountain the land lay bare for a moment of mist, and all that space was heaving incredibly. It was more than earthquake—more purposeful, far more sinister.

THEN the earth split. And the long jagged rent moved horribly, like a crawling serpent, toward the base of the crags that upheld the castle.

Godfrey Morel roared, "Kerak!" and waved a great arm toward the castle as if his shout could rouse the garrison to its danger. Then he bent in the saddle and drove his spurs deep. The war-horse gathered itself on the rocking earth and staggered, then leaped forward with a lengthening stride.

Boyce clutched the Crusader's belt and coughed in the dust that billowed up from the pounding of the hoofs. The whole world seemed to be shaking now, with a shifting uneasy motion that tossed them like a ship on water.

And there was a crawling all over the plain, a converging of the serpentine rents as though the earth meant to swallow Kerak whole. Huge cracks tore themselves open, lengthening jaggedly. The plain was like a sheet of ice breaking in a spring thaw, shattering toward the crags upon which Kerak towered.

"Sorcerers!" Godfrey howled. He was upright in the stirrups now, yelling an ancient war-cry, blindly spurring the charger across the shuddering plain. Boyce hung on desperately, not daring to shift his grip.

Before them he saw the ground yawn suddenly. He could look down steep, crumbling lips of earth into darkness, and he felt the

stallion shudder with the shudder of the plain. Then powerful muscles gathered beneath them, were ponderously released as the charger with its double burden hurdled the widening gap.

"Dieu lo vult!" Godfrey breathed suddenly, as they thundered on across the shaking ground. It was the Crusaders' rallying cry, Boyce knew, but something in Godfrey's voice told him this time it meant more—relief, prayerful thanks—"God wills it!"

He looked up. From the heights of Kerak a flicker of light was broadening like a halo around the topmost tower. It shivered and widened and pulsed outward as the rings widen in water from a dropped pebble. Circle after circle, broadening and slowly dropping, until the whole castle was ringed with falling wheels of fire. . . .

They did not stop at the base of the castle. They dropped farther, ringing the crags. They came down and down, slowly, silently, flowing and widening as they came, and ever the topmost tower pulsed them forth anew.

Where the first of the broadening hoops of fire touched the plain the earth ceased to shudder—and none too soon. For by then Kerak itself had begun to pitch a little, like a great castled galleon riding a stormy sea. The deep groan of rocks shaken one upon another sounded from the tortured crags. A little more of that, and Kerak would have begun to crack like the plain itself.

But the touch of the fiery rings was like the touch of oil on angry water. The earth quieted, the groaning of the cliffs fell silent. Kerak was firm again upon its great grey crags. And as the showering wheels of fire fell slowly downward in circles that broadened toward the watchers, the cracks in the plain began to close.

Wherever the moving rings touched them, the earth healed itself. Without a sound the great rents were sealed like closing mouths. Boyce thought of the mouths of giants, silenced but not appeased by this quiet magic. There was a feel of sullenness to the yielding of the plain. The rings flowed steadily outward, healing and quieting as they came, but the earth was not appeased.

In silence it yielded, but it was not conquered. He could feel that, somehow, in the very silence of the place. The great gaping lips of earth closed, but they closed on threats to come. They bided their time.

Godfrey reined in his trembling charger. They waited while the first wave of light lapped gently around them and went on. Then the Crusader shook the caparisoned reins on the neck before him and they paced forward sedately, the stallion wading through wave upon wave of quiet fire.

Godfrey laughed, a deep, contented noise in his chest.

"The old mage has not lost his wisdom. Kerak is still safe in Tancred's hands. But the day may come—" He flashed a glance across his shoulder.

"You may be a spy of the Huntsman—or worse," he said. "Or you may be an honest man. It's not my part to guess. There are few places now a man could come from—save the City. If spy you are, when you return tell the sorcerers that Tancred is still their match."

"I'm no spy," Boyce said hesitantly, fumbling for words in the strange, yet familiar tongue. "You saw the Huntsman follow me—"

"No man knows what drives the Huntsman," Godfrey said. "Well, here are the

[Turn page]



TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER



bastions of Kerak. Look up, stranger. Feast your eyes, if you came to spy. This is Kerak of the Crusaders!"

High, high, tremendous with quarried blocks of granite, the mighty bastions towered. It made a man dizzy to stare up those vast, converging heights. And the banner that tore at its staff as if it fought for freedom with the wind made a sound of screaming cloth and a flame of burning crimson. It rolled over the tremendous battlements like a banner of fire, shrieking to the wind in a language of its own.

"Now you must face the Oracle," Godfrey said. "And he judged, for life or death. But even if the judgment be death—by the Lance, stranger, you shall give me news from my old home before you die. That I have promised myself."

The iron gates of Kerak screamed on their iron hinges and Godfrey's stallion paced forward through the rings of falling fire. And it was thus Boyce first entered Kerak, where the last Crusaders dwelt.

CHAPTER IV

The Oracle

MIST hung in the open courts of Kerak. Attendants in archaic garments ran forward to help the riders dismount; they crossed a stone-flagged pavement, invisible in mist, and entered a half-seen door. The cold smell of stone and the fragrance of wood-fires closed about them as they went down a corridor and into a great stone hall high enough to have a drift of mist like miniature clouds hanging in layers under the vast ceiling.

This was a room out of another age. Boyce had seen pictures of such halls many times, but he had certainly never thought to stand in one, looking down the length of the room toward the dais at one end with a bright fire roaring in the chimney and men and women in the garments of six hundred years past lounging before the blaze.

He followed Godfrey over the rush-strewn floor toward the dais. There were women there, in bright velvets, belted with jewels. The breath came suddenly thick in his throat. He knew no more about her than the outline of her body against a crystal window and the flash of a brilliant face glancing once at

him across her shoulder. But if she sat here on the dais, he would know her. And perhaps she did. Perhaps she did. . . .

A great voice rang out suddenly.

"Well, Godfrey! What skulker from the marshes d'you bring us now?"

Boyce started violently and paused among the rushes, staring toward the speaker. He knew the voice. He knew it as well as his own. He had heard it somewhere very lately—not with the arrogance that was in it now, but with the same inflections, the same pitch and pacing of phrase—the same voice.

Godfrey took his arm and they went up the steps of the dais and stood before the speaker, Boyce staring hard.

"A stranger from our own land, I think, Sir Guillaume," Godfrey was saying. "A stranger from home—or a spy. I found him in the marshes fleeing from the Huntsman's pack."

The man in the high-backed seat of honor by the fire lolled at his ease, glaring up at Boyce under thick brows. He was a big man with immense strength in every line of him under the long velvet robe. His tanned face was seamed with the scars of old sword-strokes but his blue eyes were very bright and the mouth beneath a drooping yellow moustache had the arrogance born of a lifetime of command.

And it was a face Boyce had seen before—seen very recently. A face of haunting familiarity. This was nothing out of his dreams or his forgotten memories. He knew this face.

"Your name, stranger?" Sir Guillaume demanded peremptorily. Boyce was aware of a sudden flush. He did not like the man. It was more than any quick surface dislike. There was antagonism between the two. He saw it on the Crusader's face and felt it on his own.

"I am called William Boyce," he said shortly.

At Sir Guillaume's shoulder a black-browed woman in green leaned forward. She was looking from the knight's face to Boyce's.

"A moment, Sir Guillaume," she said softly. "I think—is it only my fancy, messires, or is there a likeness here?"

The others stirred in their chairs and bent to follow her gaze. But Boyce understood even as the woman spoke. He knew—and the knowledge was a flash that almost stunned him—what lay at the root of the familiarity in Sir Guillaume's face and voice. This was

impossible—it could happen only in such a dream as he walked in now.

Sir Guillaume was himself, given a few more years of age and a life-time of arrogance. The face and the voice were his own!

Guillaume was gaping at him. Now he rose and glared under bent brows into Boyce's eyes, and they were exactly of a height. Blue eyes scowled at blue eyes. Identical mouths set angrily.

"Even to the names, Sir Guillaume!" the woman in green said. "He is called by your name in the English tongue. William du Boyce—"

"I am Guillaume du Bois, certainly," the knight growled, still staring in the other man's eyes. "But if there is likeness here I do not admit it!"

A young page, kneeling on the edge of the dais, had been polishing a great Norman shield. Godfrey bent and snatched it up.

"Look, Sir Guillaume," he said.

Guillaume stared for a long moment into the mirrory steel. He glanced at Boyce and then back again, and his face began to suffuse with rage and something like terror.

Suddenly he flung down the shield. It struck the floor with a hollow clang and above the noise Guillaume roared with anger.

"Sorcery! By the Lance, this man's a sorcerer! Seize him!"

GODFREY'S big hand closed on Boyce's arm. Boyce himself, too bewildered to think clearly, shook it off with angry violence. The old French forsook him in his anger, and he could only shout in English,

"Let me go, you fool! I'm no sorcerer! I—"

His voice was swallowed up in the roars that swept over the dais as the men upon it scrambled to seize him. Two of the women screamed, and the greyhounds louncing by the fire sprang up with yelps of excitement. A moment of pandemonium reigned upon the dais.

Then above it a great, deep voice rose commandingly.

"Let him go, messires! Let the man go, I say!"

Reluctantly the turmoil subsided. Boyce, looking up with the rest, saw a tall man in black robes standing in a doorway at the head of the dais. Without being told, he knew who it must be—Tancred the Mage.

There were cabalistic symbols on the dark robe the magician wore and his head was

turbaned like that of an eastern prince, but the face beneath the turban was not what Boyce had expected. Tancred's beard was white and long, but his brows were black and met above his nose in a perpetual, imperial scowl. He wore emeralds in his ears and his fingers were heavy with flashing stones. He looked like a man who could command men even without the power his magic gave him.

"Is there no peace at all in Kerak?" he demanded in a deep voice. "Even while the castle still rocks on its foundations from the assaults of sorcery, must we have brawling on our dais?"

"All sorcery is not without the walls, Tancred," Sir Guillaume said loudly. "Look upon this man and me, and judge whether the City has not sent us another spy to—"

Tancred laughed and came down the dais slowly.

"Spy he may be, Guillaume. But there are other ways than sorcery to make two men alike. Are you so certain, Guillaume, that no kin of yours walk the earth?"

Guillaume was not to be appeased.

"I know magic when I see it. This stretches coincidence too far."

Tancred paused before Boyce, pulling at his white beard thoughtfully. Black eyes burned into Boyce's.

"Perhaps it does." The magician nodded. "But brawling give us no answers. There are better ways of smelling out City spies." He glanced around the dais, and his eye moved past Boyce and paused. Boyce turned.

In a corner of the chimneypiece a young man sat huddled under a fur-lined cloak. It was not cold here, and Boyce saw that sweat stood on the youth's pale forehead, but he shivered from time to time under the robe, and a shaking hand clutched at the collar to hold it close about him.

"Here is young Hugh," Tancred said, his voice stern. "Most of you know the story of Hugh of Mandois. He went out scouting last week and the men of the City took him. He lived a week in the City." There was loathing in the word. "And Hugh came back as all our men do—whatever return from the City. His wits half addled because of the things he saw."

Tancred crossed the dais and bent above the huddled youth.

"Hugh, lad—Hugh." The boy looked up. "Hugh, we have a question for you. Look at this man here, standing beside Sir Guillaume."

Boyce met a pair of dazed blue eyes with shadows in them. For an instant he knew that look. He had seen it in the mirror in his own eyes many times, when he strove in vain to recapture some of the memories of his lost year. That same dazed blankness, with a hint of shadows beneath.

Had he himself ever walked the City, and looked upon the things that drove men mad? "Tell us, lad," Tancred's voice went on. "Have you seen this man before? Do men in garments like his visit the people of the City? Is this man a spy, Hugh?"

Hugh of Mandois lifted his haggard stare again to Boyce, and for an instant Boyce was all but certain he would know him. He was all but certain that in his lost year he might indeed have walked those streets and met young Hugh upon them.

Too many strange things had happened to him already in the past few hours for him to feel sure of anything. His likeness in face and name to Guillaume was the final straw. Now he felt himself ready to believe or disbelieve anything Tancred might tell him of himself, so long as it offered a solution to the mysteries around him.

Hugh of Mandois let his shadowy, half-mad eyes rest a moment longer upon Boyce. Then he lowered them again, huddled the robe around his shoulders and shook his head dully.

"I do not know," he said in a thin voice. "I do not know." A shiver went over him and he turned back to the fire.

Tancred's big shoulders lifted beneath the black robe in a shrug.

"For Hugh's sake, I wish he could remember," he said, half to himself. "For his own sake, I wish we could rouse him. Well—" He looked back at Boyce speculatively. "He must go to the Oracle, of course. He—"

"Wait a minute," Boyce said abruptly.

HEADS turned, murmurs rose. The people on the dais stared at him out of angry, suspicious faces, Guillaume's nearest and glaring with that inner hatred which the two men who bore the same name and the same face had felt so instinctively for one another.

"I'm no spy," Boyce said, stumbling over the archaic French. "The Huntsman should have proved that—he tried to kill me. But I didn't come here by choice. And I won't—" Tancred laughed.

"Prove your point by the way the mist blows," he said, "but not by anything the Huntsman does. His ways are more uncertain than the clouds. Still, if he hunted you here and failed to kill you, be sure he had a reason of his own."

"Who is the Huntsman?"

Tancred's face darkened. The black brows wrinkled together above the black eyes.

"Perhaps you know better than we."

"All right," Boyce said in sudden anger.

"Take me to your Oracle, then. Let's have it over with whatever it may be, and then I'll have some questions of my own that demand an answer."

"Well spoken, stranger," Tancred was smiling again. "Come."

He swung aside with a sweep of the cabalistic black robes and waved a commanding arm.

Boyce moved after him half doubtfully. But Guillaume, grinning a wolfish grin beneath his drooping moustache, walked on one side of him, and Godfrey Long-shanks stepped up on the other.

"Now we shall know the truth about you, spy," Guillaume said. "March!"

Beyond the door through which Tancred had first entered a narrow stairway rose, winding in the thickness of the wall. Glancing behind him, Boyce saw that everyone who had been lounging on the dais was following them. The women picked their way up the steps delicately, holding their long skirts in ringed hands. The men shouldered after, whispering among themselves. The walls echoed with their voices and the shuffle of feet on stone.

They went up a long way. Boyce began to suspect that they might be mounting to the top of the donjon-keep that towered highest of all over Kerak. Through slit-like windows he caught glimpses of the misty plain spread out far below, of the last rings of magical fire dying away around the foot of the crags like fading rainbows in the fog. And across the valley the City was a blur of colored lights veiled and revealed again as the blue-green clouds drifted over it.

The light had not changed here since his wakening. He wondered if they had day and night in this mysterious, incredible land, or if the same dim half-brightness dwelt always over the fog and the mountains.

An arched hallway opened up before the climbers. Boyce, between his two guards, cleared the last of the steps and followed

Tancred's broad back down the hall. A hush had fallen over the crowd now. Even their feet no longer shuffled. They walked almost on tiptoe, and he could hear Godfrey breathing fast beside him. Whatever the Oracle might be, the castle people seemed to hold it in something like dread.

There was a curtained doorway at the end of the hall. Purple velvet hangings embroidered all over in a pattern of silver webs hid what lay beyond. Tancred laid one big hand weighted with rings upon the heavy folds. He turned then, his eyes searching the crowd. There was a rustling among them, and one quickly drawn breath seemed to sweep the throng.

"Stand forth, stranger," Tancred said in his deepest voice. "Stand forth and face the Oracle!"

CHAPTER V

Spy From the City

THE velvet curtains swept back. Boyce had one moment of wonder and involuntary dread, as he realized that Guillaume and Godfrey had released his arms and stepped quickly back so that he stood alone, facing Tancred and the door. Then he saw what the doorway framed and all other thought went out of his mind.

He did not know what he had expected. Certainly not this—this small stone room beyond the curtains, nor that which filled it. That delicate webbing of fire. . . .

It was the webbing that caught his eye first. The fiery strands were woven into a hollow framework of exquisite pattern that moved as he watched. A living framework—a living cage.

And in the cage of animate fire—a woman. No, a figure of marble. No—a woman, after all. Wax, or marble, or flesh—he could not be sure. She was not alive. That much the quickest glance assured him. The cage around her was living and fiery, but the woman within had neither life nor warmth.

She stood as a statue might stand, motionless, hands clasped before her, facing the crowd. Her long white robe was no whiter than her face and her hair fell in a cascade of pure marble pallor, straight and unbroken over her shoulders.

The face had a purity of line that seemed

to rob it of all likeness to humanity. No mortal face ever turned such flawless planes to the beholder. The eyes were closed. The lips were closed too, on a lovely line that looked as if it could never have parted. Boyce thought he had never seen a figure so coldly remote, so utterly empty of life.

For a long moment there was no sound in the hall. Very faintly, standing this near, Boyce could hear a fine, thin humming from the cage, as if the fiery bars of it sang among themselves. But from the crowd came only the silence of caught breath, and from the woman—the statue—no sound could ever come.

"What do you ask of me?"

Boyce had to look again to be sure the voice had come from those marble lips. They scarcely moved. The eyelids did not move at all. But surely no other lips in the world could have spoken in such a voice of cold remoteness. Such infinite, distant calm. A chill went over him at the sound of that gelid tone.

Tancred's voice was soft and strangely tender.

"We have reason to think a spy may stand here among us," he said. "We bring him before you that you may judge if he speaks the truth."

No sound, no motion, as his voice fell silent. The marble girl faced them with closed eyes and clasped hands, not moving even to breathe. But the wait was a listening, searching wait. Even Boyce held his breath, half-believing against his own reason that this waxen thing could see and know and answer—if she would.

The wait lengthened. She stood there deathly in her coldness and her pallor—no, not even deathly, for nothing can die that has never known life, and it was impossible to believe that breath had ever stirred those marble nostrils or blood ever pulsed beneath that marble skin.

Then with barely perceptible motion, the waxen lips parted. The voice that chilled the listener like a breath of wind over ice was clearly.

"Yea, the man lies."

Behind him Boyce could hear Guillaume's deep rumble of triumph, instantly hushed. An involuntary ripple went over the crowd, and he heard feet shuffle with angry, impulsive motion and the whine of steel half-drawn from scabbards by quick hands.

"Wait," the Oracle said coldly. "Wait."

Instant hush. In the silence, the icy voice spoke on.

"One stands among you as envoy from the City. He came to kill. He waits now to kill."

The anger among the crowd surged up again and its rumble of fury drowned out the thin, cold voice. Boyce braced his feet wide and wished ardently for a weapon.

"It's not true!" he shouted desperately. "I'm no spy! I didn't come to—"

The rising roar drowned out his voice too, and he knew one instant of that shattering self-doubt, that old wonder whether he himself knew what the truth might be. But there was no time for that now. Guillaume with both great arms lifted and a grin of triumphant hatred on his face was half a dozen paces away, and coming fast, and the crowd behind him was a swirl of shouting faces and angry eyes.

"Wait!" The clear voice, like an icy lash, cut through the noise in the hall. The marble girl's face had not changed. The lips were parted no farther than before, the eyes were still closed. But the voice had the volume of a shout, yet was still a cold, thin murmur only.

Boyce saw the eyes of the crowd leave him and fasten on the white figure in the fiery cage. They paused, flushed and angry—but they paused.

"I did not name the man," the chilly voice reminded them.

Bewildered murmurs answered that.

"He stands among you in a guise you know," said the voice of ice. "He is no stranger. He is not this man before me." She paused again. Then with an emphasis so biting that Boyce could all but feel the sear of cold upon his flesh, she said, "Must I name you, spy?"

The thing that happened then stunned them all. Boyce saw it most clearly, for he was half-facing the crowd. The others had to turn and were jostled when the first wild sound rang upon them from the back of the hall.

The sound was laughter.

A HUDDLED figure standing in the mouth of the stair-door shook with sudden, desperate mirth, flinging up a wild, pale face to stare at them. It was Hugh de Mandois, the half-mad refugee from the terror of the City.

In the first moment Boyce thought the lad was shaken with something like hysteria

from the tenseness of the scene. Then he saw the bowed body under the heavy robe straighten—straighten and rise. His eyes refused to accept the height of the figure. They carried no message for a moment to his startled brain. He gaped blankly at that which stood in the stairway door.

For Hugh de Mandois was rising to a full stature that towered impossibly over the highest head in the crowd. The cloak fell back. The garments the young Hugh had worn were ripped and fell away, and it was no human figure that rose from the huddle which had been Hugh of Mandois.

What it was he could not be sure. Boyce saw it most clearly of them all, and not even he could give a name to it. None of them saw it for longer than an instant. In that brief interval the thing stood up before them, towering, terrible, a monstrous laughing figure mailed in something that might have been glittering scales or glittering armor, something so strange the eye could only translate it into familiar things like these.

Its laughter rang like a trumpet under the arched ceiling, filling the hall with sound. And then the creature leaped. . . .

Afterward some said it fought with a sword and some said it wielded a flame instead of a blade. Certainly wounds were later dressed that looked like the ripping of heavy claws. And the smell in the hall was of scorched flesh as well as of blood. For the fight was terrible before they subdued the—
the spy the City had sent among them.

Boyce fought with the rest. It seemed incredible that one being, however large, could have engaged them all. Its speed was that of light itself, its strength beyond imagining. The strange thing was that they did, in the end, after a desperate struggle, manage to prevail.

Boyce remembered only the feel of cold, smooth limbs tossing him aside and falling after him, and crushing him with great, careless blows. How he fought he was not sure. Bare fists seemed little enough against that fabulous being, and yet he remembered the feel of his knuckles sinking into the scaled body, the sound of a groan as the blows sank, the reek of a scorching breath in his face.

He remembered the numbing coldness of an edged something sinking into his flesh, the sound of ripping skin and the hot gush of his own blood flowing down over his chest,

He remembered a heavy blow at the base of the skull, and after that he floated in a whirling of stars that closed over his head in fathomless darkness.

"And your coming here was no accident, William Boyce," Tancred leaned back in the window seat and looked at Boyce under meeting brows, his black eyes piercing.

Boyce looked away. His glance wandered about the small stone room, the canopy above the bed in which he lay, the tapestries on the walls, all of it very familiar to him now, after this long, long while of convalescence. He was tired still. He did not really want to delve any deeper into the mysteries that had brought him here.

The deep scar upon his shoulder had all but healed by now, but there was a deeper weariness in his mind. Perhaps it was the sight of the drifting mists beyond his window, changeless, grey clouds rolling eternally over a weary land.

He could see the mirages from here, too. Behind Tancred now the unreal towers of a mosque-like city were taking shape in the fog. At first he had thought it delirium when he saw these visions forming and fading again upon the mist. But others saw them too. And no one could tell him certainly whether or not the visions were wholly unreal.

"No one dares go far from Kerak," Godfrey had warned him. "The land—changes. Perhaps it is sorcery that makes the pictures in the fog. Perhaps they are mirages like those we saw in the desert before Jerusalem. Or perhaps—Dieu le vult—these are real things we see. Cities that drift like the mist. Gardens and orchards going by like ships in a sea of fog. There is no way to be sure—and return to tell of it."

He would not think of the mirages now. Tancred was speaking, and he would have to listen.

"I say it was no accident that sent you among us with Guillaume's face and name," Tancred repeated, stroking his beard with a jeweled hand. "The story you tell is such a strange one I am inclined to believe it. I believe much, because of the things I know, which my companions would think rank heresy."

He hesitated, turning a ring upon his finger, then shot a keen glance at Boyce lying among the bed-cushions.

"I could even guess," he said, "what it is that lies hidden in that lost year you speak

of. But I am not free to tell you what I suspect. This much I can say—I think you were a tool for someone stronger and less scrupulous than I. Perhaps this woman you tell me of. And if you were a tool, then tool you remain!

"For you have not yet performed whatever function they meant you for. And I think you may have been chosen for that function because of your kinship with Guillaume." The black eyes narrowed. "That means, you see, the City."

"Someone chose you from among all the men of your world, someone used you for a year there, in ways so terrible your mind has closed up against remembering. And in the end, someone made it possible for you to follow your forgotten memories into this land, where a timeless struggle still is waged between Kerak and the Sorcerers' City."

He was silent awhile, his face creased in lines of worried thought, his big ringed hand moving with a steady, unconscious motion over his white beard.

SOMETHING in Boyce's mind did not want to follow that thought. It was like an alien thing, curled in the center of his brain, trying to shut his ears and his eyes to the things Tancred was saying. An alien thing? Some other mind reaching out from distances across the mist to quiet his questioning, keep him in ignorance of things the alien creature did not wish him to know?

"Tell me," he said uncomfortably, not entirely sure the words came from his own mind, and not that half-sensed invader in his brain. "How did your people come here? I—Godfrey asks me so many questions about the countries he remembers, and I find it hard to answer him. You see—"

Tancred laughed.

"I know. I think I alone among us knows the truth. It has been a very long time since we Crusaders rode to Jerusalem, has it not? You were wise not to answer Godfrey too truthfully. How long in the years of our old world has it been, William Boyce?"

Boyce's eyes met the old magician's.

"Six hundred years."

There was awe and weariness on the bearded face. Tancred nodded.

"So long, then? A very long time indeed. I had not realized quite how many centuries we must have spent in this accursed land where time stands still." He was silent for a moment again, then he shrugged and said,

"You must hear the story, William Boyce. You are the first from our old world to find your way through the fog to our gateway.

"There have been others—a few—from other times and lands. You must not believe yourself the only tool they of the City have tried to use against us! But you will learn enough of that later by yourself, I think.

"We of Kerak lived in Normandy when the Day of Judgment was only a little way behind us," He laughed. "Perhaps you know that when the year one thousand dawned the world believed its end was near and the eternal Trumpet ready to call us to account. My father's father was a boy then. He told me the story many times.

"We were a credulous people in those days, ready to believe whatever men told us if they spoke with the voice of authority. Well, we lived past the Day of Judgment, but my friends and I fell into a strange sort of Judgment of our own and we linger in it yet, and perhaps will always linger.

"Sir Guillaume was our lord and leader. We took the cross when the Crusade was preached through Normandy, and rode away to free Jerusalem from the infidel. Perhaps you know the story of our ride. We went, a long way, for a long, long time, through strange alien lands with every hand against us. We suffered much. There were those of us who died to see Jerusalem.

"We never saw it. We lost our way, like so many others, and in the Valley of Hebron we met a stranger fate, I think, than any band of men has ever met before.

"In the Valley a castle stood. And Guillaume, liking it, thought to make himself its lord. That was the way we went through the eastern lands in those days, taking what we could and holding it until a stronger man came by. So we attacked the castle. I remember it yet—black from foundation to battlement with a scarlet banner flying from its donjon-keep." He nodded.

"Yes, the banner we fly today from our own donjon. A terrible banner, my friend. We laid siege to the black castle. For many days we camped about its walls, thinking to starve the garrison out if we could not overwhelm the place by force. We did not guess who dwelt there, or what strange powers he had.

"One night a man came secretly to us from the castle, offering, for money, to lead us by a hidden way into the stronghold. We agreed. The next day we mounted and armed our-

selves and in the earliest dimness of the day we followed the castle traitor up into the hills where he said the entrance of the secret way was hidden. He led us from a distance, carrying a crimson banner on a stall that we might see to follow.

"Many of our women rode with us. All you have seen here were in that doomed caravan. We rode and rode, through winding ways in the hills, following the red flag in the dawn. We rode a long, long way, for a long, long while, wondering why the sun rose no higher. We began to suspect magic after a time.

"I was a skilled magician even then, though I had much to learn. Presently I knew there was evil in the air, and I persuaded Guillaume to call a halt. We sent esquires ahead to ask of him who carried the flag where we were going and why it took so long.

"After a time the esquires came back, white-faced, carrying the crimson banner. There had been none, they said, beneath it. The flag itself had led us, flying like a great crimson bird through the dawn. We found no men but ourselves in all those hills, in all that misty dimness.

"Well, there was nothing to be done, then. We tried to retrace our steps, but we were lost. We were not to see our own land again, nor the friends we had left behind. We were never to look upon Jerusalem nor upon our homes. We were not to see the blue skies, and in that misty dawn the sun never rose again.

"We built this castle here, as you see it. All the land around us I think—I believe—drifts slowly past the anchor of these hills. In those days there was a strange, swarthy people who came through the fog and traded with us, food for trinkets and labor for a horse or two. We could not speak their tongue nor they ours. Eventually they ceased to come. I think their land drifted too far away.

"By then I had learned more than the people of my own land had ever guessed at. For this is a place of strange power, William Boyce. For him who knows how to look, and when, and where, much wisdom lies open for the taking. I was able to feed and clothe us through powers I had never dreamed of at home. This is a world of magic."

"Magic?" Boyce said, his voice tinged with disbelief.

"To us, yes," Tancred nodded. "Because we know only a part of the laws that make

such things possible. If we knew all those laws, it would be the science you speak of, not magic. I have learned many things here. . . I think that there are many worlds. And each has different physical laws. What is possible in some is impossible in others.

"It may be that this is a central world where others converge, so that the lores of many such worlds are mingled here, where there is no time, and where space itself may move. Because we know so little of these alien, strange sciences, we call them—sorcery."

BOYCE nodded. He could understand that. Even on Earth, different physical areas had different laws—if you didn't know the answer. Water boils at different temperatures at sea level and far above it. Rubber is pliable under normal conditions, but at sub-zero temperatures it is brittle, and in Death Valley it melts. If you know the physical laws that caused these phenomena, you called it science.

And if you didn't know—it was magic!

"You built this castle," Boyce prompted. "Then?"

Tancred's shrug was eloquent.

"After we had finished, we woke one morning to find the crimson banner flying at our donjon-height. There is magic in that banner, but no magic I know how to combat. In a way, perhaps it protects us. We have lost three men who tried to cut it down. Its redness may be the blood of those who have tried in ages past.

"We never knew whose power it was that sent us here. The magician of the black castle is another mystery among all the unanswered mysteries of our lives. And for the most part, our people have ceased to question. There is no day or night here, though we count the hours and call them days, and we sleep and call it night.

"But time itself stands still. There is no way to explain that to you, or how it is we can count the hours and days, and still remain ignorant of the years. Something in the air wipes our minds clean of memory when we try to recognize time as once we knew it. This is an eternal present. We grow no older. We never die of age or sickness."

Tancred sighed deeply and the stroking hand paused upon his beard. The black eyes were veiled.

"There must be ways in and out of this

world," Boyce said. "I came, for one. And you say I am not the first. And someone, somehow, must have come out of here into my own world and time."

Tancred nodded.

"There are ways. After we had been here—I cannot say how long—and after enough wisdom had come to me, I discovered how to open the paths outside. If I had learned that sooner, we might have been saved. But it was too late then. Two of our men went through despite my warnings, and when they had passed the gateway they fell into dust.

"All their years came on them in the flicker of an eye and they were in that instant as they would have been had they dwelt in their own world all the time that had passed. So we knew then that there was no returning for us. You, perhaps, could go back, unless you wait too long. But I think it would avail you little. Your problem is here, William Boyce. And here I think you must fight it out."

He slept. In his mind, something urged him to sleep and not to listen. He was still weary and sleep came easily. And how can a man fight the commands that rise from the center of his own brain?

Voices woke him.

"Hush—du Boyce sleeps. Speak softly."

He recognized Sir Guillaume's heavy whisper in reply and lay quiet, wondering if he should let the two men know he was awake.

Tancred, apparently still seated in the window, was speaking.

"Guillaume, you're a reckless fool. You know you must not do it."

"I do as I please," Guillaume growled. "If the plan works, we may all be saved. If it fails, I'll suffer for it alone."

"Perhaps not alone. Have you thought you may return to us as Hugh de Mandois returned? How do you know what they may do to you if they catch you in the City?"

"I tell you, Tancred, I know what I'm doing. It will not be the first trip I've made into the City. I have my own friends there now. Men who know me—or think they do—by another name. A turncoat from Kerak is a prize for the City spies. They'll buy all the information I give and beg for more. You knew my work there, Tancred. You never said no before. Why now? Since Hugh de Mandois, I feel more eager than ever to make this attempt."

"Because of Hugh, my friend. Because I

know now how deep their powers go. Never before have they worked a spy into our midst in the very likeness of ourselves. How can we trust you, Guillaume, even if you do come back?"

"You have the Oracle," Guillaume said gruffly.

Tancred did not speak for a moment. When he did, his voice was soft and Boyce thought he heard sorrow in it.

"Yes," he said. "Yes—we have the Oracle."

"Very well, then. I see no cause for waiting. Two attacks from the City in so short a time must mean they plan to move upon us with all their forces. I say, learn what we can from them whatever the cost may be. If I risk my neck, who's to forbid me in Kerak? Not you nor anyone!"

"You risk more than your life, Guillaume," Tancred said.

There was no answer but a snort.

"Very well," Tancred's voice was level. "You are master here."

Heavy feet crossed the floor. The dogs opened and closed. Lying with closed eyes, Boyce heard Tancred sigh. He thought of one question that he meant to ask, but it did not seem to him that just now was the moment to ask it. He wanted to know more of the ice-pale girl whom the Crusaders called the Oracle, who and what she was, and why Tancred spoke to her with gentleness and heard her name with such sorrow in his voice.

CHAPTER VI

The Sleeping Spell

IN KERAK CASTLE time stood still. But space around it flowed slowly by. Now that Boyce knew, he thought he could see the slow, slow ebbing past his window. The City itself, Tancred had told him, had drifted out of some distant foggy region into their valley. In time—no, in the passage of space, not time—it would float on and each citadel would forget the other.

But now, like enemy ships passing each other in neutral waters, they were engaged in battle and only the destruction of one—or both—or the widening of space between them could make an end to the conflict.

Guillaume had gone. Boyce knew it only because he missed the arrogant, deep-voiced

presence on his convalescent journeys about the castle. No one would answer his questions when he inquired after his namesake. Godfrey had vanished too. Even Tancred had withdrawn and spent most of the waking hours locked in his towerheight, busy with secrets of his own. No man or woman in Kerak, except Tancred himself, knew what lay behind that tower door.

"He had a pool of water there," one of the castle women whispered to Boyce when he spoke casually of the room. "No one knows how, but he uses it in his magic. And they say he has mirrors in his room that show a man his own thoughts."

"Voices come out of the room when we know only Tancred is within, and sometimes very sweet singing, like the voices of angels. And once a strange little beast, bright gold, with a blue halo around it, escaped under the door and ran down the stairs. The boy who caught it burnt his hands on the halo."

Boyce had no way of guessing how much time went by before the morning of the Silence. It was very curious how impossible it was to measure time in this grey world. One could make a tally of the hours and still be helpless to reckon them up in intervals of longer than a week or two. Time was too slippery for the mind to grasp.

But one morning—though there was neither night nor morning in Kerak—Boyce woke to an awareness of profound silence. He sat up in his canopied bed and listened, bewildered, oddly sure that it was the silence itself that had awakened him. Silence and a sense of pressure in the air.

He dressed rapidly and ran down the twisting stairs to the great hall of the castle, where at this hour the trestle tables should be set up and the castle folk gathered noisily at breakfast.

There were men and women in the hall, but they were not noisy. They lay silent in attitudes like those of puppets dropped in mid-stage when the hands of the puppet-master failed. Some had fallen over loads of wood brought to feed the great fire that should now be roaring up the chimney instead of smouldering in sullen ash beneath the stone hood of the fireplace.

Some lay with broken dishes and spilled food beside them. The dogs stretched silent in the rushes. Hawks in feathered hoods clasped their perches along the wall, rigid as hawks of stone.

Boyce stared in bewilderment over the

silent room. Nothing moved—and yet it seemed to him that the air itself was in motion. It was as if people went by him unseen, brushing his shoulder in passing but weightless as the air they displaced. And there was a strange, sweet, pungent odor in the castle—very faint, nothing he had ever smelled before.

"Magic," he whispered to himself, without any reason whatever. "The smell of magic!" He needed no reason for that thought. It came unbidden to his mind and he knew that he was not mistaken.

These people were not dead. They slept. He went among them anxiously, shaking the sleepers by the shoulder, calling their names. No one stirred. He dashed cold water in the face of a serving wench who slumbered beside her pitcher. She did not even sigh. It was a magical slumber and no power, he realized at last, but the power of him who had cast the spell could waken these people from the depths of enchantment in which they lay.

Alarm grew in him as he went through the silent castle, finding no waking man or woman or animal as he went. Only Boyce himself moved and was awake. And that in itself was frightening. There was a purpose so sure and grim behind all that had been happening to him since he broke the crystal window and heard the Huntsman laugh—no, since before that. Since the beginning of the year he had lost.

In all that while, he sensed now, he had been moving inexorably along some path predestined for him by an unseen planner. Nothing happened to him that did not move him nearer whatever relentless goal the planner meant him to reach.

Today, he thought, he had come to a mile-

stone of that progress. Today, surely, he alone of all the castle was awake for a purpose not his own. The air whispered with the passage of invisible people as he went up floor by floor, searching the silent building.

Tancred, in the topmost tower, he did not seek until the last. He was not sure about Tancred. In that room of magic, there must surely have been a screen to protect the castle's wisest man from the onslaught of the City.

UP AND up Boyce went through the sleeping castle.

"Sleeping Beauty," he thought. "Sleeping Beauty in the enchanted castle—a spell like this. I wonder—it might have been just such a castle. And there may be more precedents than we know for the old tales. Sleeping Beauty—"

He paused on the stairs. Until that moment he had not thought of the real sleeper in this castle. Whether Kerak waked or slept or lay under an all-embracing enchantment, the Oracle would surely stand as she always stood, locked in her strange sleep.

Tancred had told him nothing of her. And the rest of the garrison folk were too much in awe of this marble girl to say even what little they knew. "I'll try it, anyhow," he thought. "I'll go to her and ask—"

In the center of his brain that small, coiled, alien censor seemed to stir to life. Weariness that had not let him listen when Tancred spoke of certain things. *Something* was not willing for Boyce to speak with the Oracle.

But this time he fought it. This time he would not surrender. A deadly weariness weighted his limbs as he climbed, but he

[Turn page]

Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign Of Tired Kidneys

If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of

pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's gives happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(Col. 1)

set his jaw and climbed grimly on.

"You," he thought, "whoever you are—this time you've got to fight."

Was it that nameless, formless being who had moved him like a pawn on the chess-board for the forgotten year in his own world and the uncountable days he had spent in this? Had that chess-player taken up a citadel in the center of Boyce's own brain?

"If you have," he promised doggedly, "from now on, you're going to have trouble with me."

Weariness was a weight like death itself on his shoulders. His eyelids drooped. Sleep was in the castle, brimming it from barbican to donjonheight. He was all but drowning in it. The stone stairs wavered before him like stairs seen under water.

But the weariness in itself spurred him on. For now he knew he had guessed correctly. They had left him awake for a purpose of their own when they deluged Kerak with sleep. But if he meant to fight, then he too must slumber while they accomplished whatever deadly thing they planned.

He would not sleep. The stairs were mountains under his stumbling feet. His brain swam with the fragments of dreams. But grimly, step by step, his feet carried his reeling body on. And at last, after a time more fluid even than normal even in this floating world, the stairs no longer rose under him.

Here was the hall of the Oracle. And there, far away, hung the purple curtains netted with silver threads. Far, far away, down an endless corridor that dissolved before him. . . .

He had no memory of walking that hall. He knew his relentless body must have carried his spinning head forward, but he did not know at the time what went on. He only knew, at the last, that something soft touched his outstretched hand, waking him out of a troubled nightmare.

For this moment, at least, he was his own man again. Sharply and clearly the world came back into focus and he was awake once more. The castle still brimmed all around him with sleep and the smell of magic, and the air now and then swirled as if invisible beings went quickly by. But Boyce, at last, was vividly alive.

He put out a firm hand and pulled the curtain back.

There was the cage of fire, alive and softly humming with its own vitality—and within

it, the marble girl. It had not occurred to him to wonder if he would find her here. To his mind she was as fixed as a statue in her niche, and he was not surprised to find that so far as the eye could tell she had not moved or breathed or spoken since that hour in this same hall when the hand of the enemy had last fallen upon Kerak.

Now, in the presence of the enemy again, with the hall swimming in alien magic, Boyce stood quiet, breathing hard, and waited.

It seemed a long while. She stood facing him, ice-pale hands clasped before her, her ice-white hair and ice-white robes falling in unbroken lines to her feet. He felt a moment's almost irresistible temptation to put out an exploring finger and touch the robe, the clasped hands, to learn if he could whether she and the robe were of the same marble, if this were a statue or an image of half-living wax or a woman incredibly empty of life.

He did not quite dare. He stood watching the closed eyes, the closed lips with their line of pure, flawless beauty as inhuman as the beauty of a stone image. And he saw, almost imperceptibly, the lips part.

"What do you ask of me?" the cold, clear, distant voice inquired.

And for a moment, hearing that voice he was struck as he had not been struck before by his utter loneliness here. It took this voice from the chill, inhuman lips to remind him most clearly that he was the only living, waking human in Kerak—unless Tancred had been spared.

All around him the air flowed with hostile magic. The castle was a great chalice brimmed with sleep, a tomb for the half-dead slumberers whose lives hung upon the caprice of the conquering City. Only he stood here alive and awake, and all his hopes were pinned on this marble being which was surely neither awake nor alive.

"Tell me what to do to save Kerak," he said, his voice a little unsteady.

IF SHE understood, she gave no sign. He was assuming, somehow, that she knew what was happening around her, that the closed eyes did not need mortal vision to tell that closed and marble brain of Kerak's danger. He wondered if she cared at all.

In the silence, watching those closed lids, he thought the air had begun to shake a little, to a deliberate rhythm. It was the faintest possible pulsing through the hall,

but his senses were strained to their highest pitch just now and he was almost sure of what he heard.

Then the Oracle spoke.

"Hear me," she said in that clear, indifferent voice. "Hear me. There is one who comes to Kerak."

Now he was sure. The strong rhythm beat out its measure and the air quivered in response. Someone was left alive then, after all. Someone who—who marched upon Kerak? For the rhythm was like the tramp of heavy feet, measured, relentless coming nearer with every succeeding beat.

"One man comes," the Oracle told him. "The magic comes before him. He is a man who must die, or Kerak dies." She paused. Then, with chilly indifference, she said, "The man's name is Guillaume du Bois."

Tancred's door was studded with iron stars. Boyce paused before it, hand lifted to knock, and listened to the heavy beat like thunder in the air that echoed the footfalls of the man who was coming to destroy Kerak. He could still not quite believe what the Oracle had told him.

His own queer, spontaneous hatred for Guillaume made him distrust his own reactions. The thought of killing Guillaume—if he could—was a dangerously exhilarating thing. But Guillaume had gone out to risk his own life for Kerak's sake, and Guillaume was Kerak's lord.

His knuckles on the star-studded door made hollow echoes that rolled down the hall behind him. There was no sound from beyond the door. He knocked again, and waited, while the coming footfalls of—Guillaume?—shook the air through all of sleeping Kerak.

Then Boyce lifted the latch of Tancred's door and pushed it slowly open.

A curl of rosy smoke drifted past him as the door swung back. It smelled of flowers. Fanning it away from his face, Boyce looked into the room which no eyes but Tancred's had ever seen since the builders left six hundred years before? An hour, a day, a century—time had no meaning in Kerak.

This was a room of magic, but its magic had not saved the man who lay here, fallen forward across a low table with his head resting on his arm and his white beard streaming across the carved edge of the table. With all of Kerak, Tancred slept. On the painted surface before him a heap of

silvery ash in a black dish smouldered slowly, giving out the flowery smoke that floated in layers through the air. It shuddered rhythmically now to the increasing footfalls of him who walked toward Kerak.

"Tancred!" Boyce said hopelessly. "Tancred!"

To his amazement, the lolling head moved a little. Very slowly, with infinite effort, the big shoulders drew themselves up and the magician rolled his head sidewise slightly and groaned.

Boyce found himself on his knees beside the low table, shaking Tancred's shoulder.

"Can you hear me?" he demanded. "Tancred, are you awake?"

He was not awake. But neither was he wholly asleep. Somehow, in the few moments between the coming of the magic and the conquering of Kerak, Tancred had managed to perform some averting spell which partly nullified the effects of slumber. Probably, Boyce thought, it was this smouldering ash that filled the room with rosy layers of cloud and the fragrance of flowers.

"Tancred!" he repeated. "Can you hear me?"

This time Tancred's eyes opened a little and his black eyes looked out through a film of sleep into Boyce's face. It was as if the mage looked at him through a curtain, standing alive and wakeful and impatient behind the veil which he could not lift.

"Shall I trust the Oracle, Tancred?" Boyce demanded urgently, shaking the black-robed shoulder. "There's a spell over Kerak—you know that? The Oracle tells me I must kill Guillaume. Does she speak the truth, Tancred?"

LIGHT came briefly into the half-lidded eyes of the mage. The bearded lips stirred. Tancred made a mighty effort to break the bonds which magic had forged upon him. Boyce saw the veins stand out in his heavy neck, and the dark face which the suns of the Holy Land had tanned too deeply ever to fade grew livid with strain.

But he could not speak. The bonds of sleep were too heavy. He gave one last convulsive effort that lifted his head a little way off his bended arm, and Boyce saw him nod—once, twice. It was enough. He had his answer.

Then the magician's breath ran out in a sigh and he collapsed again in slumber upon the table top while the futile, flower-smelling

smoke wreathed about him unnoticed.

"Kill Guillaume," Boyce heard himself saying softly in the quiet room.

The air shuddered around him. No—this time, not the air alone. The floor shook underfoot. There was the sound of heavy boots on stone, and each footfall made the whole of enchanted Kerak tremble to its foundation.

Suddenly Boyce felt his heart beginning to thud in quickening beats that matched the approaching steps; the breath was thick in his throat and exultation filled him as the enchanted sleep brimmed in Kerak Castle. His hatred for Guillaume was a tangible thing. He knew now, in a flash of understanding, that he had lived every hour in Kerak toward this one moment—toward the killing of Guillaume. For that purpose, it seemed to him now, he had been born, and lived to this one exultant hour.

There was no reason behind it. Dimly he knew that it must have been foreordained to happen so—or why was only he awake in Kerak when the destroyer came? But he would not think of it now. He would not try to reason why Kerak's lord had come back to Kerak as its destroyer. Reason was not in him. Hatred was all that remained, and the exhilaration of battle.

The footsteps, like the tread of a giant shaking the stairs they mounted, were very near him now. The air was thunderous with its echoes of that tread. Dimly Boyce thought there were moving shapes about him, brushing his garments as they went invisibly by. He had no time to wonder.

There was a sword lying across Tancred's table, close by his limp, outflung hand. Boyce snatched it up, stripped the sheath away, balanced the great blade in his fist. And as he did so, a sort of electrical shudder ran up his arm from the hilt, and Tancred, lying across the table behind him, stirred and sighed. The sword moved of itself in Boyce's grasp. It made an arch through the flower-scented air and brought itself up into position.

It was a magical sword, he knew then.

Laughter sounded in the hall, deep, wild laughter that was not wholly Guillaume's. More subtlety was in the sound than Guillaume had ever known. Then, for the first time since enchantment had fallen upon Kerak, Boyce remembered Hugh de Mandois, and how strangely changed he had come back to the Crusaders.

CHAPTER VII

False Crusader

THE star-studded door flew open with a crash that echoed and re-echoed in Tancred's tower-room. The rosy smoke-layers swirled wildly. Guillaume's great bulk filled the doorway. He was laughing as he came, in deep, shaking gusts that Boyce thought must ring through all of the silence and the magic that brimmed Kerak.

Guillaume's huge sword, bare in his mighty scarred fist, flashed in the dim air of the chamber. His face was not mirthful. Though he laughed, it was his mouth alone that laughed. His eyes had the veiled look that Tancred's showed. A shadow was over his arrogant, stubborn face, and it was a terrifying shadow.

"Tancred!" Guillaume roared, in a voice that should have wakened every sleeper in the castle. "Tancred, this is the hour you die!"

He took one ponderous step forward—the whole room shook to that inhuman tread—and the great two-edged sword swung up over the mage's head.

In some remote corner of his brain Boyce knew suddenly and certainly that this was not the true Guillaume. The enmity between them was an enmity of the blood, a bond like kinship which neither could have broken by himself.

The Guillaume who had left Kerak would never have ignored Boyce standing here with a sword in his hand, to roar threats at a sleeping Tancred. No—this Guillaume was not the same man who left the castle.

Of its own will the blade in Boyce's grasp swept up in a glittering arc. And it rose not an instant too soon. Guillaume's sword was already falling, and in another moment the mage's head would have rolled from its shoulders across the painted table.

There was a clash in mid-air like the clash of meeting thunder-bolts. Fire sprang out as steel screamed against steel. Guillaume thundered a ponderous curse in a tongue Boyce had never heard before (the tongue they speak in the Enchanters' City? he wondered wildly) and the great blade rose again, shearing through the wreaths of colored smoke above Tancred's head.

It was a strange battle. They were iron men in the days of the Crusaders. The mighty swords they swung were so heavy a modern man could scarcely lift them in both hands. Magic alone made it possible for Boyce to meet the terrible, crashing blows Guillaume was raining upon his blade. Magic and the cunning of the sword which fought of its own enchanted will—and the fact that Guillaume never once really turned his blows against Boyce himself.

Guillaume—walking in magic, and with the shadow on his face that was not wholly the face of Guillaume—had come for one purpose only to Kerak. He had come to kill Tancred the Mage. All his sword-strokes were bent upon the sleeping Tancred. It was Boyce's part to keep the steel shield of the magical blade between Guillaume's and the magician. He did not have to fight to protect himself, but the fight to protect Tancred was a desperate battle indeed.

Lightning leaped through the chamber whenever the great blades screamed across one another. And Guillaume's footsteps thundered impossibly upon the flagstones, every tread shaking the whole castle. He was more than a man—he was a sorcerer's godling, walking in thunder and wielding the lightning. But he fought blindly, and he walked blindly, and it was not Guillaume behind that arrogant, shadowed face.

The end came suddenly. Boyce knew he had no part in it. He felt the blade he wielded shift itself in his grip, leap as if with abrupt triumph and dart at last in a flickering lateral stroke that snaked in under Guillaume's blow and struck the Crusader hard, edge-on, against the corded thickness of his neck.

It was a clean blow. It should have lifted Guillaume's head clear of his shoulders. But it did not. Sparks leaped out as if the blade had struck steel instead of muscle and flesh. There was a dazzling coruscation of jagged lights, and a ringing sound like a gong struck heavily, and Guillaume cried out in a strange, breathless voice, "*Dieu lo vult! Dieu—*" as if that blow were what he had prayed for.

Then everything shifted inexplicably, indescribably, before Boyce's eyes. The chamber that yet rang with lightning and thunder from the battle of enchanted blades fell suddenly silent. Guillaume was falling.

He fell slowly. The two-edged sword dropped from his slackened grip and clanged

upon the flagstones. He sank to his knees and very deliberately seemed to float forward until he lay face-down upon the floor. Boyce heard the great sigh he gave as he collapsed.

It was as if deafness had suddenly been lifted from Boyce's ears, then—for Kerak Castle awoke.

And on the painted table, Tancred sighed and stirred. All through the castle beneath them were stirrings and startled voices as the slumberers awoke. The air no longer shuddered to every motion Guillaume made. He was a normal man again, with only a human's powers. And looking down at him, Boyce was surprised—but not entirely surprised—to see that from his neck a broken collar hung.

It was a collar of glass.

Tancred rose. Boyce, turning to face him, saw that the magician was breathing heavily as if he and not Boyce had fought that battle of the enchanted swords. Sweat was bright upon his brown forehead above the meeting brows, and his great chest heaved.

"It was you," Boyce said softly, bolding out the sword.

Tancred nodded. He was still almost too breathless to speak. He took the weapon from Boyce's hand and drew a finger down the length of the blade, and Boyce saw something—some brightness, some strange aliveness—fade and go out in the wake of the moving finger.

"Yes," Tancred said. "But without you, I must have failed. My thanks to you, du Boyce." He slid the sword back into its scabbard and dropped it on the table. "Now as for him," he said, nodding toward the prostrate Guillaume, "—as for him—I wonder."

HE DROPPED to one knee beside the fallen man, reached out a cautious finger to the shattered glass collar which had stopped that deadly final blow. He touched it—and there was a clear, ringing sound like a wineglass shattering. The collar leaped of its own volition and flew into a glittering powder, and was gone.

Guillaume stirred and moaned.

Gently Tancred turned the Crusader over. Guillaume's head fell back and his thick throat worked convulsively.

"It was not I, Tancred—they sent," he whispered.

"I know, Guillaume. No matter now.

"You're safe."

Guillaume scowled and shook his head a little, with infinite effort. "No—not safe. Godfrey—I must go back—"

Tancred laid a ringed hand over the Crusader's mouth.

"Hush, Guillaume. You were possessed. You have no strength left even to tell us what happened. Wait."

He rose wearily. Boyce, watching, was aware now for the first time of the strangeness of this tower-room. Until this moment he had been too preoccupied with the urgency of what was happening to see any more than the essentials of the place. Now he saw—the magical things.

There was the pool the castle woman had whispered of. It lay in a little alcove on the far side of the room, round, framed in bright tiles, and a tiny tide of its own surged slowly outward in rings from the center of the circle. And magic hung over it. Boyce could not have said why, but he could sense it in the air above the pool.

Shelves lining the walls were thick with things Boyce had no name for. He saw books in many languages, some of them he was sure not earthly languages. A harp hung on one wall, its bright strings rippling a little now and then as if invisible hands stroked them, giving out the faintest possible humming music, almost below the level of hearing. And in one louvered box in a corner he thought he caught a flicker of motion occasionally, as if some small being moved inside.

Tancred took a crystal goblet from a shelf. It was empty when he touched it, but by the time he had turned and bent to Guillaume, the goblet was half filled with something translucently red and pungent-smelling.

"Drink this," Tancred said, kneeling and lifting Guillaume's head. The Crusader obeyed. He seemed too exhausted to move of his own will or to question anything the mage might say. It was an unnatural exhaustion. There was about it something almost like the utter emptiness of the Oracle.

But after he had drunk, a little life came back into his face. He lifted himself weakly on one elbow and looked up urgently at Tancred. His voice was scarcely more than a whisper.

"Godfrey—" he said. "Prisoner—in the City. Help me, Tancred. I must go back to him."

"Your strength is very little, Guillaume,"

Tancred told him. "It will not last long. Tell us what happened while you can."

Guillaume closed his eyes for a moment before he spoke.

"We went into the City as we had planned. I met my—my acquaintances there. They were eager to buy the secrets I offered them. We bargained. I—knew there was one close to the councils of the Sorcerer King. I waited for him—too long. I never saw his face, but his name is Jamai—he is a very evil man."

Guillaume's voice faded. He waited, gathering his strength, and then went on in a weaker voice.

"There are—factions in the City. The King—would not destroy us utterly. He hates us, Tancred, but for some—strange reason—he would destroy us one by one, not all together and Kerak with us. Jamai is his chief enchanter. He hates us too, and he has no scruples.

"Do you know, Tancred—there is a bond between Kerak and the City? Some bond that keeps the City from drifting on its way? The lands do move. The City has its course, like a ship. Jamai would be off on that course. He longs to cut the bond, whatever it may be, that holds them here."

Tancred nodded.

"I think I can guess what it is."

"He—will destroy Kerak," Guillaume went on. "All this was—his doing. The King—did not guess. I was mistaken about Jamai. I tried to bargain—secretly. He took us both—Godfrey and me. I must go back for him." Guillaume was silent for a moment, and his eyes clouded as he looked back into the past.

"He is hostage," he said. "For my success here. I must release him, Tancred. He lies in—a strange prison. Strange—I cannot tell you how strange."

"How was this magic done?" Tancred asked. "Do you know that?"

Guillaume nodded weakly.

"The collar," he said. "I would have sworn it could not be—that I should wear the collar of a master. But I wore it. And the spell—was simple. Sleep ran out before me—as I came. It was not I. . . I think Jamai—or his mind—rode mine as a man rides a horse. He saw through my eyes. Until the collar broke—it was not I."

He struggled to sit up.

"Now I must go back," he said. "Godfrey—"

Tancred put out a hand and pressed him back.

"One will go for Godfrey," he said. "Not you, Guillaume. But Godfrey shall be saved if mortal man can save him. Rest assured of that."

Guillaume was not to be assuaged so simply. He lay back in obedience to Tancred's hand, but his eyes were fiercely questioning. "Who?" The voice was only a breath.

Across the Crusader's body Tancred's eyes met Boyce's.

"The answer to your problems, du Boyce, does not lie in Kerak," he said. "I have known that for many days. Will you seek it in the City?"

Startled, Boyce glanced at Guillaume, meeting the glare of his own eyes looking back out of that arrogant face so much like his.

"You can serve yourself and us," Tancred went on. "If you take up the links of Guillaume's plot I think you may find your way more easily than if you go alone. For only you can go—as Guillaume."

BLUE mist swirled about his knees as he walked slowly across the sandy plains between Kerak and the Sorcerers' City. Boyce drew the blue cloak about him more warmly, for this air was damp and cold. Beneath the cloak he wore tunic and hose from the store-rooms of Kerak, and across his chest the red Cross of the Crusader blazed.

It was the cross men wore who had set their faces toward Jerusalem six centuries ago. None in Kerak carried the cross upon their backs to proclaim the pilgrimage completed, though all but Tancred still cherished the hope of doing so. For them, time still lingered where they had left it to step into this cloudy oblivion in which no sun rose or set.

Boyce touched his face experimentally for the hundredth time. He was not yet sure how Tancred's skill had managed to engrave there the arrogance which marked Guillaume's most sharply in contrast to his own. The drooping moustache of the Crusader was all that remained of the golden beard which had grown during the days—the weeks, the months, perhaps—of his convalescence. To the eye, he passed as Guillaume.

And he was going deliberately—like a fool, he thought—into the same trap which had sprung on Guillaume. He wondered a little why he was risking so much for the sake of these people who were nothing to him except

exiles from the same world. True, they had taken him in. He owed them gratitude for that.

But he went into dangers now too deadly to have names. Remembering Hugh de Mandots, he shuddered. To be possessed by a scaled demon such as Hugh's—to be ripped apart like a garment, body and bone, when the demon chose to stand forth. . . .

No, he had no duty to the Crusaders that could force him to risk a fate like that. He risked it of his own will. He risked it because of—gratitude?—kinship? He knew it was not true. He would have gone if Kerak had never stood here on its crags, if Godfrey and Guillaume were dust in the world of their birth.

He must have gone, and he knew it—because of a woman whose face he did not know, a woman who had looked briefly over her shoulder at him in a fragment of memory and smiled beneath her iron crown.

She dwelt, he thought, in this city before him. Tancred had told him that much. And Tancred had told him of the bond which linked Kerak to the City.

"You have wondered about the Oracle, du Boyce," Tancred had said an hour ago, sitting in a high-backed chair in his tower room and turning a cup of wine in his jeweled fingers. "Before you go, I think you must hear all I know of her story. She is—" He hesitated, looking down into the wine. "She is the child of my only child," Tancred said finally.

Boyce straightened in his chair, muffing an involuntary sound of amazement.

"Then she is alive!" he said. "I thought—"

"Alive?" Tancred sighed. "I do not know. I have learned much about science and about magic since we came to this land, and I have seen much in my mirrors of secret things in the City. But about this one thing I know almost nothing. I know only that some terrible wrong has been done, and I think it is resolved, for good or evil, the bond will always hold between Kerak and the City. Unless one or the other is destroyed. . . ."

He sipped his wine.

"Drink," he urged Boyce. "You will need strength for your journey. The lands between here and the City walls are cold and the mist is like floating rain. Drink your wine and listen."

"The City was much farther away from here when my daughter, who had come to us from Normandy on the Crusade rode out one

day and lost herself in the mists. It was the last we saw of her for a long while." His face grew grim, the black brows meeting above the black eyes.

"Those of the City took her," he said after a pause. "The Sorcerer King beheld her, and because she was beautiful, he kept her in his palace. He had many slaves. To do him full justice, I believe he held her in high honor. She was a very lovely woman. She bore one child to him—a daughter. Then she died.

"I have never known how. Perhaps poison. Perhaps the bowstring, or some more mysterious way. Or perhaps she sickened, and died of her illness. I never knew. I saw her but once before her death—briefly, outside the City walls.

"The child lived on in her father's palace, and grew and became a woman. It is very strange, that—" He shook his head, the emeralds glittering in his ears beneath the turban. "Time goes so differently there and here. I think time moves and is counted in the City.

"I know my daughter's daughter grew to womanhood while here in Kerak there was no time at all. Young pages among us now were young pages before my grandchild's birth, and now she—she stands in her fiery bower, a woman grown."

He poured more wine.

"What happened in the City I do not know. She was her father's favorite, and I think some quarrel came up between them, and for punishment, perhaps, he made her as she is now.

"I only know she came to us like a ghost, like a marble woman, walking with closed eyes and clasped hands, white as snow, and as silent. Some instinct seemed to lead her to her kinsmen when she could no longer endure the City of her birth.

"We took her in and tried to tend her, but she asked only for a room in which she could dwell quietly. We gave her the room you have seen. And when we came in the morning, she stood as she stands now, in that cage of singing fire. She spoke to us from it, with the voice of an oracle.

"There is much power in her. With those closed eyes she can see into men's souls. Wisdom is in her, but locked behind that silence.

"She is not always caged. There are times when the fire dies down and vanishes, and then she walks from the castle into the mist and is gone awhile. I think—I cannot be sure,

but I think she meets someone down among the plains. But always she returns to her room and the bower of fire takes shape around her again.

"It is my belief that so long as she dwells here the bond between her and her father, the King of the Sorcerers' City, will anchor them to us as a ship is anchored. And if what Guillaume tells us is true, the King will not have all of Kerak destroyed while his child remains here. He would gladly kill us all—but not his daughter.

"That is why I think there is hope for your mission to the City. If Jamai, who is the King's minister, were king himself, my hopes would be small. I can tell you no more than this. As far as I may, I will watch you. It may be I can help. But I think you came here for a purpose—led by what magic I cannot guess—and I am sure the answer to your coming lies in the City."

He drained his cup again.

"Do what you can for us there, du Boyce. Remember you have a link with us in Kerak too. Your likeness to Guillaume is no accident."

A FAINT drift of music through the mist roused Boyce from his thoughts. He looked up. Above him loomed the high walls which he had first seen from that gateway through the solid rock when he broke his way into this world. Lights gleamed from the heights of the wall. He could hear the tented roofs billow a little in the breeze from the plains and the fog was stained with bright colors where the glow fell upon it.

Boyce turned and went left along the base of the wall. There was a small gateway he must find, marked with a circle of blue lights. Guillaume had told him it was a pilgrims' gate. Guillaume said the drifting City was for many in this unstable land a holy city, filled with altars to gods that bore strange names. Pilgrims from far away over the plains sometimes came here, by twos and threes, by caravans, sometimes alone.

Guillaume had told Boyce the word that would let him in.

"Say you come to worship Nain," he said. "You need only that one name—Nain. Many of the pilgrims do not know the tongue the City speaks, so you will not need to know it. You can make yourself understood. The people of the streets speak a patois of which our own French tongue has become a part in the long time we have lived in Kerak."

He hesitated, a look of bewilderment overspreading the exhaustion of his face, but he did not think that idea through. It was as well.

Kerak and the City must have lain anchored together on the drifting lands for a long time indeed, if the old French had incorporated itself into the street patois.

"You must ask the way to Nain's temple," Guillaume went on. "One will meet you there when you have done, as I told you. After that—" He shrugged. "Dieu le vult."

A gateway in the wall loomed up at Boyce's right. It was closed. Upon the panels a painted face with staring yellow eyes regarded the fog. Boyce went on by, trying to shake off the illusion that the eyes rolled to watch him pass.

THE next gate was open, but the insignia painted on the back-flung leaves was a standing dragon, and something about the scaled picture reminded him forcibly of that monstrous thing which had cast aside the garment of Hugh de Mandois' body in the hall at Kerak. He wondered what he might find if he went in at this gateway—wondered if it was here that Hugh had entered—and passed quickly by.

The third gate was closed. A ring of blue lights glimmered on its panels. Boyce stood before it in the rolling fog, drew a deep breath.

This was the gate. Under this arch he must enter the enchanted City and find the answer to the questions which had driven him so long and so far.

He slipped his hand into his belt and touched the one thing he had brought with him from the outer world—that small, cold crystal which had cast its web of light upon a wall and opened a window for his entrance. It lay there against his side, hard, cold with a faint chill that struck through his clothing. It was his only link with her—nameless and faceless—and the lost year he had sought so long.

Perhaps he might find his answer soon. He lifted his hand and knocked faintly upon the gate. There was a long silence. Then with a sighing of hinges the blue-lit door swung open.

Music drifted through it, and someone's light laughter from far away.

Boyce squared his shoulders and stepped forward.

He entered the City of Sorcerers.

CHAPTER VIII

The Colled Bluff

"KERAK'S quarrel," Guillaume had said, "is with the Sorcerer King and the men about him. The common folk of the city know little about us and care less. You can go safely among them—or as safely as anyone may go who enters for a pilgrimage. That is not very safe, du Boyce. Go carefully."

The man who looked out of the opened gate bore out Guillaume's warning. He was a swarthy, small man with shifty eyes and a bandage around his head. He gave Boyce a look of indifferent dislike and said something in a tone of bored inquiry.

Boyce said, "Nain."

The gatekeeper nodded and stood back. Boyce bent his head under the low archway and stepped into the street within.

It was a narrow street, walled by high, narrow houses. Colored lanterns hung here and there from upper windows, and the pavement was wet with fog, reflecting the lamplight. A curious city, Boyce thought, in which it must seem always just dusk, with the first lamps lighted in the streets.

This was a street of music and merrymaking, to judge by the sounds that came from the windows he passed. Most of them were set with tiny diamond-shaped panes that distorted the scenes within, but he caught glimpses of confused colors and shifting bodies and heard laughter and the smell of wine drifted from every open door. There was strange, wild music that sent its rhythm echoing involuntarily through his mind.

The people on the street were a mixed lot. Tall, fair men in striped robes that billowed around their long strides—short men, red-skinned, in turbans and tight-fitting coats—women with perfectly transparent veils across their faces, who smiled indiscriminately upon every passerby—women the color of polished ebony, who wore broadswords and swaggered as they walked in their scarlet tunics down the middle of the street.

Boyce, tall and fair-haired, in his blue cloak and scarlet-crossed tunic, had no reason to feel conspicuous in that crowd. No doubt there were symbols upon the garments of many others with meanings as esoteric as

those on his, drawn, perhaps, from the worlds as unknown here as Earth.

He passed a little man in grey rags, who carried a striped paper lantern over his shoulder on a long stick, and touched the man's arm, saying, "Nain?"

The man smiled at him and nodded up the street, indicating a turn at the next corner. Boyce thanked him in English, grinned to himself to hear how fantastic the familiar tongue sounded in this dim, wet street, and went on.

Twice more he asked his way, once of a grim-faced woman wearing a horned helmet and a green velvet robe that swept the ground, once of a man in armor whose plates glistened like mirrors in the light of the colored lanterns. On the third try, he found the temple he sought.

It was a big stone building, lightless, without windows, standing in the center of a square. The streets parted around it, flowing noisily with colorful crowds, but the temple of Nain maintained its austere silence even in the midst of that rioting crowd.

Boyce climbed the grey stone steps and paused under the archway at their top to look down a long room that twinkled around its walls with row upon mounting row of colored globes, thousands upon thousands of them, each burning in its paper lantern upon shelves that lined the walls. There were others here, a throng as motley as the street crowds, strolling and whispering through the big empty room. If there were ceremonies in honor of Nain, evidently they had not yet begun.

Boyce went straight down the room toward a translucent wall at the far end. Guillaume had said there was a magical tree growing there. He found it was a tree of glass, espaliered flat against the crystal wall. Clusters of luminous, richly colored fruit dangled within the worshiper's reach.

Calmly Boyce reached up and pulled a round blue fruit the size and shape of a pear. It vibrated in his hand for a moment, as alive and resilient as something of blown glass. Then there was a tiny exploding sound and the fruit vanished, leaving only a drop of blue moisture in his palm.

Someone touched his arm from behind. He whirled a little too quickly. It was a brown girl, barefooted, bare limbed, with gold bands on her wrists and ankles and a heavy gold collar locked around her throat.

She said, "Come," in the old French,

spoken with an accent that might be the City patois, and led him back down the room toward a side door. They came out upon another street, lined with great crouching stone beasts that shone with the moisture of the fog.

The beasts had lanterns around their necks and the crowd went by under their stone jaws in the swinging light of the lamps. The brown girl beckoned to Boyce and then hurried down the steps on soundless bare feet and plunged into the throng.

There was something wrong with this crowd. He was not sure just what, but he saw how the people kept glancing over their shoulders uneasily. Their noise was a little hysterical now. Sometimes they looked up, into the misty sky, and presently Boyce heard a thin, shrill keening overhead that was louder than the noise of the crowd, and grew louder still as he paused to listen.

The effect upon the people was electrical. Faces turned up, suddenly pale in the uncertain light of the lanterns. There was a little echoing moan that seemed to run like a breeze over the whole crowd, a sound coming in one breath from every throat there. And then, like magic, the crowd began to melt away.

DOORS opened all along the street to receive them. Here and there someone beat impatiently at closed panels, calling in a low voice to those within. No one called loudly. It seemed to Boyce that within a moment after the first shrilling sounded from overhead, there was no one left upon the street.

The bright crowd had scurried by under the stone images and then, in a twinkling, the wet street was empty except for a straggler or two who glanced curiously at Boyce standing there alone and then vanished into the nearest shelter.

There was a patter of feet on stone. Boyce looked down. The brown girl was motioning impatiently to him.

"Come," she said urgently. "Come—hurry! There's no time!"

He went uncertainly toward her over the wet pavement. It was not fast enough to suit his guide. She swooped down on him, seized his arm and pulled him along at a run toward a door behind one of the stone beasts.

"What is it?" Boyce demanded. "I don't understand—"

"They come," the girl said. "Hurry! In

here—quick, before *They* reach this street!"

The door creaked on its hinges. Within was darkness and Boyce remembered Guillaume's warning to go carefully. He beld back a little, not sure whether it would be more dangerous to enter or to stay outside.

Then from the street before him a little breath of cold air blew past, fluttering his cloak. It was a cold that seared like heat. And terror came with it—terror and such a revulsion as he had not known since the moment in the fog when he first came to this land and saw from a hilltop the dark procession winding down toward the City gates.

It was *They* indeed—those who walked among a twinkle of lights and a twinkle of tiny bells and a cloud of darkness that veiled them mercifully from sight. *They* who went upright like men, and were not men—*They* whom he knew he had seen once with the woman whose name and face he could not remember—or forget.

The old sickness came over him when he thought of *Them*. He turned swiftly and stumbled down three steps and fell against the door the brown girl held for him. He was shaking hard. He felt the cold burning down the street as the door shut behind him, heard the first thin tinkling of the bells. And the high shrilling from overhead was like a ringing in the ears, maddening, impossible to shake away.

The door shut out most of the noise. It was dark now, but a firm hand took his elbow and he hurried down an unseen hall beside the pattering steps of his guide.

What kind of a woman is it I'm hunting? be wondered, when all I know about her is that she once went familiarly with *Them*?

"The King summoned *Them* again," the girl in the dark beside him volunteered,

speaking in her strangely accented patois. "There must be strange things happening among the tents tonight. A rumor is that the lords have attacked that castle in the mountains you can sometimes see from our walls."

So there was some connection, then, Boyce thought. Perhaps at last the pattern was beginning to click into place, and his own part in it might come clear.

A door opened before him upon light and smoke and voices. The brown girl pushed him through.

He saw first a lamp hanging from the center of the ceiling over a broad table. The table was tiled into intricate patterns, and some sort of game seemed to be in process upon it. A circle of men bent above the counters, their faces in shadow because of the hanging lamp.

One of them was laughing and sweeping counters in. They were carved and jeweled pieces a little like chessmen, and each one rang with a different note when the players touched it.

When the door opened there was a little bush and the men looked up.

"The man from Neis's temple," the brown girl said.

"You're late," one of the players declared. "Have you brought what you promised?"

"Waste no time on him," someone else urged in a belligerent voice. "He's made us wait too long already. His stories are probably lies from the beginning. I say—waste no time."

Boyce looked at them blankly. Guillaume had not told him about this. The Crusader had been lying on the last brink of exhaustion and there were obviously things be

[Turns page]

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was unable to recall. This must be one of them.

Obviously Guillaume had been pretending to offer secrets for sale on the castle defense or Tancred's strength or something else that the lords of the City would buy. Boyce felt a surge of anger and dismay. The risks were great enough, certainly, in his coming here at all, without walking into a trap unarmed and unwarned.

There was only one course to take. He strode forward with Guillaume's arrogant, rolling step and struck the table a blow that made all the counters jump on their squares and ring faintly together.

"By all the gods!" he roared with Guillaume's great bellow. "You'll take what I give and wait my pleasure on it!"

There was an angry murmur around the table. Chairs scraped back across the tiled floor and one man rose and threw down the counter he had been holding. It rolled across the board, jingling as it went.

"You speak with a big voice, for a traitor," the man said. He was young, by his tone, and slender in an ankle-length robe of chain steel, slit on both sides above the knee to show red leather boots and red breeches. He carried two long daggers in his belt, and his plumed hat's brim dipped broadly down in front to shade his eyes.

"Later we'll brawl if you still want it. Now you'll give us your news if we have to tear it out of you." He glanced around the table. "Many of us would rather take it that way. I would myself." He laughed and laid both hands on his dagger-hilts.

One of the others, a short, broad man with flaming red hair, jumped to his feet and tossed back the purple cloak he wore to show the long barbed whip coiled like a belt about his thick waist.

"Why should we pay the dog anything for his secrets?" he demanded in an unexpectedly high voice. "I know a way to make him bow! We'll—"

A white-haired man in a white fur cloak lifted his hand placatingly.

"Friends, friends, be silent! Let the man speak."

"Let him lie, you mean," the red-head said sullenly. "The last time we met him and his friend they promised us Kerak on a silver tray and that was the last we saw of them. They've had payment already for secrets they never told us. It was wonderful how fast they vanished once they got their hands on our

silver.

"Now this one comes back alone and talking as lordly as Jamai himself. How do we know where the other one is? Offering the same secrets to someone else who'll get to Jamai before us—that's my word on it. I'm finished. Deal with him as you will. I say—let him die."

BOYCE laughed contemptuously. "The least talk the loudest," he said. "I'm back among you—isn't that proof enough of good faith?"

He wondered if it was. Evidently Guillaume and Godfrey had dealt with these men just before their capture by Jamai. And the story of that capture must be secret or he would not now be in danger for having disappeared without reason. Desperately he wondered what secrets Guillaume had meant to invent for them. If he could only have found Godfrey first.

"Enough babble, enough!" the red-haired man broke in. "I want my own answer! Will you lead us by that secret way you spoke of, dog? That I've paid for and I demand your word on it. Are you ready to take us secretly to Kerak when our master gives the signal?"

Recklessly Boyce said, "Yes!"

There was a drawn breath all around the table. Then the white-haired man straightened in his chair and smiled. His face was in shadow, like all the rest, but Boyce could see the triumph on it.

"Very well," said the man. "That is good. We are ready—now!"

The red-haired man laughed, seeing Boyce's face.

"We tricked you there! You were not expecting that. But we must go quickly, as soon as the streets have cleared." He glanced involuntarily toward the door, and a shadow of pure revulsion touched his ruddy face.

The white-robed man stood up.

"No delay," he said. "Or Jamai's spies may warn him what we plan. Now as for the course we take—"

Boyce was not listening. He knew he could not go through with it. Even if he were willing to play the traitor, he could not for he knew no secret ways into Kerak, if any such existed. Also, it was no part of his vague plan to leave the City now, just as he had entered it. There was Godfrey to be rescued, for one thing. And for another—he had not

yet come any nearer to the girl in the iron crown.

"Wait," he said harshly. The men around the table were all on their feet now, tightening their belts, talking eagerly among themselves.

They turned to him expectantly, suspicious eyes gleaming in the shadow.

"This is beyond my bargain," Boyce said. "I was not paid for such a risk as this. I'll need more money."

"You were paid beyond your deserts the first time," the red man began angrily. "You—"

"I'll be a masterless man when Kerak falls," Boyce told them brazenly. "I must look out for myself then. I'll need more silver for that."

Someone who had not yet spoken laughed in the shadows.

"He betrays his lord for money and demands more because he's masterless," the new voice said. "I like this man, friends!" Boyce thought there had been something familiar in the voice and in the strange tone of the laughter. Later—if there was to be any such time as later for him—he would try to remember. Just now he had no time to spare.

"More money or I go nowhere," he said stubbornly.

The red-haired man growled a curse in some odd language that sounded as if it had been made for curses. He took a purse from his belt reluctantly and threw it jingling on the table.

"There, dog. Buy yourself a new master with that, then."

"Not enough!" Boyce sneered beneath his new moustache. "For alms like that I'd get no better man than you!"

The red man laid a freckled paw upon his whip-belt. He snarled in his blasphemous language and Boyce thought for an instant the battle would begin there and then. But the snarl died. The man set his teeth grimly, took out another purse and flung it beside the first.

"Dogs come high in this place," he growled. "And now—"

It was no use. They needed him too badly. Boyce would have to provoke them still farther before he could escape.

"Money or no money," he roared suddenly, "I'll not lead you to Kerak, red-head! You stay behind or the bargain's ended. I've taken a dislike to the color of your hair."

CHAPTER IX

Escape by Water

IN THE amazed silence, the young man in the chain mail laughed softly.

"Don't you see?" he said. "The fellow is trying to force a quarrel. He doesn't mean to go at all!"

For a moment, no one moved. Then the white-haired man with the gentle face tossed his cloak back over one shoulder.

"I think—" he said quietly, "I think he had better die."

There was a quick, concerted motion in the room, and Boyce heard a sound he had never heard before—a curious metallic minor note all through the crowd. It was the whine of swords drawn simultaneously from their sheaths.

The shadows were suddenly alive with the flash of bare blades. Boyce's hand flew to his own belt and the light sword the Crusaders had given him leaped into his fist. But this was no magical blade. It was good, sharp, beautifully balanced, but he must fight this battle alone, without Tancred's magic gripping the hilt of the sword he wielded.

The red man bellowed once, a deep sound of pure fury, and his hand flashed toward his belt. There was a ripping sound as the barbed whip uncoiled and arched through the air like a serpent with fangs along its sides.

"Now, dog—howl for your master!" His voice was choked with rage. The whip sang through the air and Boyce had an instant's vision of his own face laid open to the bone as the lash fell.

He leaped back, groping behind him for the door. His hand found it just as the whip fell. It fell so little short of his cheek that the wind of it fanned his mustache, and he could hear the vicious whine of the barbs along the edges of the lash singing in his ear.

The door was locked.

He heard the whip strike the floor at his feet with a metallic crash of jangled barbs. He heard the redhead's sobbing breath of fury, saw him step back and brace his thick legs wide for a second try. He saw beyond the red man the flicker of nervous blades as the others crowded tensely forward, poised to close in if the whip should fall again.

He saw the young man in chain mail, a dagger in each hand as long as a short sword,

come lightly around the table toward him, walking as if on air, his whole body poised as lithely as the whip itself.

Then again the lash sang. With the motion of a snake it arched backward and seemed to hang in midair for a tense and singing moment. The red man's wrist curved forward and so did the hanging whip.

This time he could not avoid it. Boyce's back was against the door and the youngster in chain-mail harried the only other exit. He could feel his flesh crawl already in anticipation of that terrible clawed lash, and he knew there was no hope for him now. The adventure that had begun with the first of that lost year would end in this room with the ripping of his flesh from his bones, and he would never know the answers he had sought.

In this last moment before the lash fell he had one vivid glimpse of a scene he had remembered only dimly before. He saw a crowned girl standing before a window as delicately crystalline as a snowflake's pattern. He saw her very clearly in memory as she turned and glanced at him once across her shoulder. He saw her eyes bright with violet fire, and the whiteness of her smile and the deep crimson of her lips. He saw all the brilliance and the danger of that nearly forgotten face.

And this time, in the stress of his danger, a name rose in his mind. He did not know if he whispered it aloud or not. It couldn't matter. Nothing mattered now—not even the fact that he could speak her name—at last.

"Irathe!" he said it to himself in a passion of fury and despair. "Irathe."

And then the whip came down.

Laughter—familiar laughter—sounded again from the far side of the room. And beside him, just as he saw the lash's tip leaping straight for his eyes, feet suddenly made a soft, quick thudding on the floor.

Something dazzling shot past his face. Boyce braced himself for the impact of the whip. It took him a perceptible moment to realize that the barbed blow had not fallen. Dizzy with bewilderment and surprise, he fell back a pace to the right and stared, hearing a clang from the opposite wall.

Before him on the floor lay the severed whip. A long dagger, bright in the lamplight, clattered across the floor and lay still. A thrown dagger that had flashed past his eyes to cut the whip in two.

He turned his head and saw the young man

in mail poised beside him, the second dagger lifted in his hand.

"Get me that knife," the youngster said peremptorily to Boyce. "Quick! I'll put this one through the first man that moves!"

Automatically Boyce stooped and took up the blade that had saved him. Eyes still on the crowd, the youth reached out blindly for the hilt. The dagger seemed to jump into his hand, so expertly did he take it. Now he jerked his plumed head toward the door beyond him.

"You first," he said. "Quick! Outside!"

Still too amazed to question anything, Boyce slid past him against the wall and reached the other door. The youth backed after him, both throwing blades poised menacingly. His lithe body was poised as menacingly as the knives. Boyce thought he was laughing, though he could not see his face.

He stood in the doorway a moment, his quick glance searching the room. Bare swords quivered in the light as the furious crowd about the table leaned toward him, none quite daring to be first to move. Eyes glared redly under the swinging lamp.

THE youngster laughed aloud. Then with a quick motion he raised one booted leg and kicked the table over at the angry faces before him. Boyce, catching excitement from the sound of that exultant laughter, came suddenly to life and leaned out beside his mailed rescuer. Long arm and long sword reached over the armored shoulder and Boyce slashed the chain that held the lamp.

It crashed down over the falling table. There was a wild jingling of musical counters spilled from the game-board. The light flared sharply and went out. Darkness swallowed up the room and with it the angry faces of the men inside.

"Good work," the young man laughed across his shoulder. There was the sound of a slamming door close beside them. Then, "Run! This way!" and a hand that still held a dagger nudged his arm.

Through pitch blackness, along an echoing passage, the two fled. Behind them through the closed door a confused uproar sounded. Then Boyce saw light ahead, and realized that they were coming out upon a broad underground pier with black water on both sides of it. At the same moment he heard the door behind them burst open and the shouts of the pursuers gain suddenly in volume,

echoing hollowly along the corridor they had just cleared.

"Boat here," Boyce's companion gasped breathlessly. "End of the pier—hurry!"

The sound of their racing feet was like thunder on the hollow boards as they ran for the end of the dock. Someone yelled behind them, and a vicious whine sounded past Boyce's ear. Ahead of them an arrow struck the pier and vibrated, singing.

The feet of the pursuers struck the dock now, and the dark underground place echoed and re-echoed to the noise of heavy boots on boards and the shouts of the angry men. A bowstring sang again and another arrow whined past. Boyce glanced back.

The redhead was foremost among the pursuers, purple cloak streaming from his shoulders. He brandished the stub of his mutilated whip, a formidable weapon still with its length of barbed lash. The rest made a jostling mob behind him, among which swords flickered in the light of the lamps strung along the edges of the pier.

Boyce heard again that annoying, familiar laugh among the shouts. He would place it when he had a moment to spare—he would think once more of the crowned girl whose name he knew again, after such a long, long interval of forgetfulness. But later, later—not now.

His companion was kneeling at the end of the pier, leaning over to untie a boat. He glanced up as Boyce came panting to the water-edge. "Hurry!" he said. "We'll make it yet! I—" And then his gaze went beyond Boyce and he said more sharply. "Look out! Behind you!" and leaped to his feet.

Boyce spun. The redhead had paused a little distance away and was swinging his whip again. Shortened though it was, his range was too close to miss. Boyce dropped almost to one knee, ducking under the vicious inward curl of the lash, heard it whistle overhead and launched himself hard for the redhead's thick body.

His shoulder struck the man in the chest, and he heard the gasping grunt the man gave and felt the toppling body give way beneath his driving blow. It had all happened quickly. Boyce scrambled to his feet as the redhead rolled across the dock.

He snatched up the sword he had dropped in the moment of impact, seeing the red-booted feet of his companion flash by him as he rose. He looked up in time to see his rescuer make a joyous sort of leap toward

the fallen man, kick him twice in the face, and give the squirming body a last thrust of the boot-toe that sent him splashing off into the black water.

Then Boyce was clambering down the short ladder toward the boat with the first of the others almost upon him. Over his shoulder there was a flash of red boots and silver mail, and the armored youngster hit the boat before him. Boyce slashed the rope that held it to the pier with one stroke of his sword.

Beneath him, as the rope parted, he felt an instant forward surge and the pier seemed to drop away as if by magic in their wake. The boat was very low, and not much larger than a rowboat. It was dead black in color, so nearly the shade of the black water that to the observers it must seem they moved unsupported over the surface of the waves.

Whatever power moved it was invisible. It might have had a motor, but if it did, there was no sound or vibration to prove it. Boyce thought it must be propelled by some force of this unknown world harnessed to a science such as Tancerd had described, a science so wholly alien that magic was as good a word for it as any.

Several more arrows sang past as the boat shot smoothly away, but the shafts dropped into the water behind them. In a few moments even the shouts from the pier had died, as the lights died, and the boat moved through darkness and silence.

Limp with relief and more than a little confused by the sudden change of attitude which his companion had shown during the fight, Boyce sat back in the boat and sighed heavily.

"All right," he said. "What now?"

Against the dim luminance of the water he could see in vague outline the younger man's hat and head and bent shoulders. He seemed to be guiding the boat. He laughed softly in the dark. It was not a reassuring sound.

"Wait and see," he said.

CHAPTER X

The Wrong She

DAYLIGHT glimmered ahead, the grey half-daylight which was all these drifting lands ever knew. The boat glided under an archway and Boyce caught his breath at sight of what rose before them. It

was a great round tower that seemed to be all of filigree, story upon story of it, the interstices glazed with sparkling crystal. Its wall rose straight from the center of a moat-like lake.

Within Boyce could see dimly the shadows of moving figures here and there, no more than animate blurs upon the filigree walls. A tower of glass, he thought. And Guillaume had worn a collar of glass. Was there a connection there, or did all the City use glass-work in its building and its magic? He remembered now that he had broken through glass to enter this curious world.

The boat moved swiftly and smoothly over the grey water amid clouds of mist and a low door opened in the base of the tower as they neared it.

"Now we are home again," the armored youngster said, and bent his head beneath the arch as the boat glided in. Boyce stooped too. They came into a water room walled with translucent glass, and a man in a brown tunic, a collar locked about his neck, came down broad steps to take the boat from its master.

"Come," the young man said, scrambling out of the boat and hurrying up the stairs, his red boots flashing beneath the heavy mail.

Boyce followed him only as far as the platform around the pool. Then he took a firmer grip on his sword, glanced around the room for the nearest exit.

"Not yet," he said grimly. "I don't know enough about you. Let's get all this a little clearer before I—"

"I think," the young man interrupted, pausing in the doorway, "I heard you call upon Irate."

Boyce gave him a long, steady look. Under the hat-brim the man's eyes were watchful. After a moment Boyce put the sword back into its sheath at his side.

"Go ahead," he said. "I'll follow."

He heard the other laugh to himself. Then the man turned and led the way up a ramp of translucent crystal that wound around the tower just inside the filigree walls. They were transparent from within, and Boyce could look out over the whole city as they climbed, seeing the narrow streets open out beneath him, again filled with their colorful crowds.

Toward the center of the City a building of black stone rose square and sheer above the rooftops. Above Boyce on the stairs the

younger man waved a pointing arm.

"The King," he said.

Boyce's brows lifted. The brown girl who had guided him here said it was the King who summoned Them. They had wound in their dark procession through these very streets, then, toward that high, black building where someone awaited them who was not afraid—or was even the King afraid?—to look upon their faces. And it was City gossip that the summoning had something to do with the conquest of Kerak.

There was a painted room at the head of the ramp. Three walls of it were covered with patterns of birds and flowers seen against a bright sky. Boyce glanced carelessly at the colorful scenes, looked away—glanced back with amazement.

"Blue sky?" he demanded, scarcely knowing he spoke. "Birds, flowers, blue skies? Here in the City?"

His host had crossed to a far corner and was unbuckling his sword-belt. Boyce's eyes swept the room. The fourth wall was of glass and framed a vast panorama of City streets and mist and mountains beyond them, and a distant glimpse of Kerak with a tiny flash of crimson above the towers which was Kerak's enchanted flag. Heavy golden curtains covered the walls here and there, and there were broad divans and deep chairs cushioned with velvet. It was a luxurious place.

But he scarcely saw it. He was still enthralled by the presence of blue pictured skies, when so far as he knew the City had drifted forever on the sluggish land-tide of a world that knew no real day.

"What do you know about the sky?" he demanded, turning to the silent figure of his host.

He saw the figure stoop to lay down the broad plumed hat. His back was still to Boyce.

"As much as you know, William Boyce," the other said amazingly.

Boyce's breath stopped for a stunned moment.

"Who—who are you? How do you know my name?"

The young man did not yet turn. He lifted both arms to the latches on the shoulders of his mail robe, clicked them deliberately and let the linked steel drop away. Beneath it he wore breeches and a close-fitted tunic of scarlet, above the scarlet boots. He put his hands to his head and shook out a sudden

wreath of dark curls that fell upon the crimson shoulders as he turned.

He laughed.

"Do you remember now?"

The room spun around Boyce. It was dark, a roaring darkness that was only the blood in his ears. He opened his mouth, but no words came. He stared and stared, and could not move or speak.

She was not wearing the long robe he remembered, nor the iron crown. But the violent eyes were there, the color of hot small flames, and the same smile he remembered, white and scarlet and dazzling. And the same look of brilliance and danger and malice.

He said in a whisper, "Irathe!"

"There," she said softly. "I knew you'd remember, in the end."

She came toward him slowly, walking with a lovely swaying gait he surely could not have forgotten until now. When she was very near him she lifted her arms and her head fell back until the dark curls lay in wreaths upon her shoulders.

HE KNEW before he touched her how the strong, soft body would feel in his arms. In the instant before they kissed he knew what the kiss would be like, the shape and the feel of her mouth beneath his. Even the spicy fragrance she wore was familiar. He did not yet remember fully, but he knew he had held her thus many, many times in the past, in his lost year.

"And so you remember, now?"

Boyce shifted his arm about her, the dark curls fanning on his shoulder in a fragrant mass. They sat together on a divan before the window, looking out over the tremendous panorama of the City and the hills beyond.

He paused a moment.

"No. A little—not much. I'll have to know, Irathe." He hesitated over the name. He was not sure yet, not sure at all how much had been solved by this meeting. He was still uncertain about her. He knew too little.

He was thinking of the way she had used her throwing-knives in the gaming-room brawl, of how her scarlet boots had kicked an enemy twice in the face before rolling him into the water to drown. Now she was all softness and fragrance in his arms. But it was not quite like this that he remembered her. He was not sure yet what it was he did remember—but he thought he knew what

he did not remember. It was not like that.

"You loved me in your own world, my darling," she murmured against his cheek. "You loved me enough to—to follow me here, I think. Can you say you've forgotten our year together on Earth?"

She was mocking him. She knew he had forgotten. She knew because it had been her doing that he had. He closed his eyes and struggled with his own mind, determined to prove her wrong this time.

Slowly, painfully, in snatches and blanks and brief, vivid pictures, a piecemeal sort of memory began to return.

"There was a house," he said carefully. "On the river. You—it was your house. Big, quiet. No one around and a—servant? One, two people—" He recalled suddenly the swarthy man who had come to take the boat in the pool-chamber below. "People from here!" he finished in surprise.

"Of course, why not? From my native City." She smiled at him derisively. "Go on. Your memory's better than I thought. Go on—if you dare!"

He paused at that. Yes, somewhere at the other end of this memory was something frightening—something she knew of and dared him to recall. He would not. But he would go on a little more. Not too far. . . .

"I met you—somewhere," he said, groping for a dim picture of the two of them together in some forgotten public place. "It was—I don't know. Somewhere, by accident—"

Her laughter stopped him. Malice and derision sounded together in it.

"Accident, you think? Oh no, that was not accident, my darling! I searched for you a long time—or for one like you. One of the blood of the Crusaders."

He turned to stare into her violent eyes. They mocked him.

"But that can't be true. I'm not." He hesitated. Guillaume du Bois—William Boyce. Face and name the same.

"Why?" he demanded. She moved her cheek catlike against his shoulder.

"I had a task to do. I still have a task." For a moment he thought he heard weariness and genuine feeling in her sigh. "I have gone many times into many worlds, seeking many men and women, trying to finish that task. Perhaps you'll finish it for me, my darling. Perhaps I've found the right man at last."

He did not answer. He was thinking clearly and rapidly, watching memories tumble

through his mind like a kaleidoscope, pictures that shifted as he watched into new patterns, some of them significant, some sheer nonsense as he recalled them.

He had met the girl—somewhere. He knew that now. And he must have fallen instantly, irrationally in love. He could remember a part of that delirium now; he could feel a part of it still, at this moment, with this warm, sweet-smelling girl in his arms. But there was something wrong. It was not quite the same girl.

In that year there had been no question. He had followed her because he could not help himself. It was sheer infatuation, obsession—as if a spell had been laid on him to follow wherever she went. And she went to her big, quiet, secret house on the river in New York. And there, with him and with her servants, for a long, long while she had worked at—something.

What? He had not known, even then. There were wide gaps in his memory. There were blanks, induced deliberately he thought, to keep her purpose secret. But if she had chosen him because of his likeness to Guillaume, his remote kinship with Guillaume—then her purpose must have been connected with Kerak and the destruction of the Crusaders. Why? It seemed a trivial thing to stretch over so wide a range of time and space, to involve such infinite effort.

In the end—careful, careful, he reminded himself—in the end had come that thing which was too terrible to recall—the thing that had sealed off his memory of the whole year, like scar-tissue to protect a wound too deep to heal without it.

Something about Them. . . .

A DARK procession coming up from the river, with tiny lights twinkling and tiny bells ringing, and a breath of cold as searing as heat blowing before them to warn all beholders away.

Watching them from an upper window—congealed with an incredulity and a revulsion that would not accept what he saw—something about a doorway he watched, and They parading through it toward him, walking like men, though they were not and never could be men themselves.

Her head had turned upon his shoulder. She was looking up at him and smiling a wise, malicious smile.

"I warned you," she said. "Even then, I warned you. You shouldn't have stayed that

long. So I had to do whatever I could to make sure you'd forget." She laughed, as lightly as she had laughed when she kicked the fallen red man on the pier. "You forgot!" she said guiltily.

Suddenly Boyce knew there was something wrong here. He realized the wrongness so quickly that his body moved before he was aware that he had stirred. He found himself on his feet facing the divan, and he knew he had flung Irathe from his shoulder and sprang away as if the touch of her were loathsome.

"It wasn't you," he said, his voice sounding thick and strange. "I know now—it was someone else, not you!"

He saw her lovely, brightly tinted face convulse as if a flame had shot up behind it, lighting a violet glare in her eyes and drawing her beautiful, bright features into a grotesque shape of evil.

"It was. It was!" she screamed. There were fury and passion in her voice, and a strange, wild grief he could not understand. But above all, there was evil, sheer, pure evil such as he had never dreamed to see so nakedly in a human face. No face could be wholly human and hold so much of it.

"No!" he shouted and saw her double suddenly, with a motion like a striking snake, and snatch at something hidden inside the loose top of her high scarlet boots.

He should have taken warning. He should have dodged. But she moved too fast for him. She straightened and her red arm flew back, and he saw something black and blurred flying straight at his face. He saw it come, and grow enormously and spread to shut out all the room behind it. But he did not see it strike, for he was no longer there to see or feel.

He floated in oblivion, rocking on mists like the clouds that move over the face of the drifting lands. . . .

Pain in bright, regular flashes roused him slowly. He groaned and stirred, not knowing it was himself who moved. It hurt to breathe. He opened his eyes and looked up blankly at a high window framing a fantastic panorama, twilight and a City lighted as always with colored lanterns swinging in the breeze above wet, narrow streets.

He tried to get up, and could not. Little by little, awareness came back. He was lying on the floor by the divan. His wrists and ankles were tied tightly—with vicious tightness—as if Irathe had drawn the bonds

with all her strength. His head ached and he had been struck a number of times across the face, by the stiff, stinging feel of it. Also, he thought, she must have driven her booted toes into his ribs, to judge by the pain that accompanied each breath.

He wondered how long he had lain here. There was no way of telling time—if time existed at all inside the City. There were things he had to do. Godfrey still lay imprisoned, hoping for rescue from Kerak, and he knew there were other duties he might remember later, when his head stopped spinning.

What had happened? He had angered Irathe, of course—he was not quite sure how, but he had touched her in a very sore spot if the fury in her voice and her actions had been any criterion.

And yet—it had not been she. Lying there on the floor, he forgot for a moment his more urgent problems in the all-encompassing mystery of just who that crowned girl was whom he remembered so vividly. The name, the face—yes. But this fiery-eyed girl with evil like a lantern burning in her—no, it had not been she. . . .

He stirred again, and said softly, to himself, "Irathe."

Instantly there was a sound in the room. Bare feet came across the floor almost in silence, cautiously, and a brown face bent above his, unfamiliar from this awkward angle on the rug.

"Master," said a gentle voice with fear in it, "master—do you know me?"

SHE was brown and bare-limbed, and she wore heavy golden bands on wrists and ankles, and a golden collar about her throat. She was the little guide who had taken him from Nain's temple to meet Irathe and her quarrelsome fellow-conspirators. He had not yet had time to wonder about that strange combination, or what Irathe had been doing there among them, in disguise.

"Master," the girl whispered again, her eyes rolling above him so that the whites showed as she watched the corners of the room for—Irathe? Was she a servant of Irathe herself, or was this show of terror genuine? He could not trust anyone at all in the City now.

"Master, I followed all the way," the brown girl whispered. "I must ask a question, master. Are you Jamal's man?"

Boyce's head ached. He did not know

Jamal except as a name and a menace. He was tired of all this intrigue of which he knew so little and he had no strong feeling just now for any in the City but one.

"I'm no one's man but my own," he said angrily. "But if Jamal is against Irathe, I'd like to know him. Is that what you want?"

She smiled a white smile above him.

"Thank you, master." The brown face disappeared briefly. Then he felt hands turning him gently, felt the coldness of a blade against his wrists, felt the intolerable tightness of his bonds fall away.

"That will be painful, master, in a moment," she warned, working on his ankles. "When the pain passes, we will go."

He rubbed his wrists.

"Where?"

"If the gods are with us and we leave this tower alive"—her eyes rolled again, fearfully—"we go to one who is Jamal's deadliest foe."

"And Irathe's?"

She looked down evasively.

"We must go quickly," she said. "It is better not to talk until we're free of this house."

Boyce shrugged. His limbs were beginning to prickle with returning circulation, but the pain in his side lessened as he waited, and he was eager to go. He could deal with Irathe later, and he would. That was a promise to himself.

The brown girl was holding one of the draperies aside and beckoning to him. There was a grille in the wall, and a steep stairway winding down into blackness. Limping, Boyce followed her into the dark.

CHAPTER XI

Again the Huntsman

BEFORE a high oval door that glowed silver in the light of her tiny lantern, Boyce's guide paused at last, holding up her light to show him the latch.

"Beyond this door I dare not go," she said frankly. "You must, if you seek Jamal's downfall."

"Who sent you?" Boyce demanded, keeping his voice as low as hers.

They had come a long way through winding underground corridors, surfacing only twice to walk a short distance along alleys

or across lighted streets. The motley city life went on unheeding around them. If Irathe had missed him yet, her searchers were subtle. And the conspirators she had helped him evade might be looking for him too.

He could not guess about that. He followed the brown girl through devious paths because she, at least, promised him a chance of action. Alone he knew he could not accomplish anything in this inscrutable City. Allied with Jama's enemy—whoever that might be he could at least gamble on success.

"Who sent me?" the girl echoed now, holding up her lantern to look at him in the dark passage. "My master will answer that, lord. You go to him now. But he is—capricious, lord. You must go the rest of the way alone, and I dare not pass this door."

She swung it open and stood back.

"My master awaits you at the end of the corridor, lord."

Boyce went in cautiously. The corridor, like the door, was silver, walls, floor and ceiling polished to mirror-brightness. From overhead small lamps hung, swinging a little in the breeze from the opened door. It was a city of lamps, Boyce thought—little lanterns and glass and wet streets with mist blowing through them in a changeless twilight.

The door closed. He went boldly down the hall toward the curtains at its far end. His own reflections went with him, distorted in perspective above and below. Looking up, he saw himself grotesquely foreshortened and floating upside down in space. Looking down, he was a fantastic dwarf in unfamiliar garments, cross-blazoned, mustached, his image repeated infinitely everywhere he glanced. He felt dizzy in his own distorted company.

He was not alone.

Someone walked behind him, at his very heels, someone's breath fanned his cheek when he turned. But the someone was transparent as the air. He saw in the mirrors only himself in those dizzy myriads. He went on.

Something padded before him on soft feet. There was a clink of metal, like a blade in a scabbard, and a muffled laugh and something rushed by him down the hall with a thumping of feet and a gust of displaced air when it passed him.

Something whistled by his face, the wind of it cold upon his skin. It sounded like a sword.

He met his own startled glance, infinitely multiplied in the mirrors, when he looked

around in alarm. Nothing more. But whatever the thing was, it had not touched him. He remembered what his guide had said—"My master is—capricious"—and smiled grimly to himself.

"He wanted me or he wouldn't have gone to such trouble to get me here," he reasoned. "If this is a test of nerve—well, let him play his games, whoever he is."

And he walked on as calmly as he could, ignoring the footsteps around him, the sound of breathing, the padding of soft feet like the feet of beasts. The curtains looked very far away at the end of the corridor, but he would not let himself hurry to reach them. Confidence was growing in him. He thought he had at last begun to understand a little of what lay behind his coming.

The curtains parted before his touch. He passed into a low-ceiled room whose dark walls were hung with embroidered draperies, beneath ceiling tented with a striped canopy that billowed now and then as if from passing breezes. Here, as everywhere, lamps hung from above. There was a dais across the other end of the room, and a low couch on it. But the dais was empty. The room was empty.

Boyce looked around him, half in anger. Before he could move, laughter sounded from behind him, along the way he had come. He turned, knowing the laughter at last. Low, and with a snarl in it. He had heard it often before, most lately in that quarrelsome company of conspirators where Irathe took his part.

The curtains through which he had just come opened again. For a moment no one was there—the curtains framed an empty hall mirroring only its own length in geometric confusion of walls and floor.

Then the curtains fell and a man in tiger-striped garments came into the room, laughing to himself, leaning back on the leash from which two snarling cat-creatures led him across the floor.

"William du Boyce," the Huntsman said. "Welcome to my palace. We have postponed our meeting too long already, you and I."

Boyce scowled at him, saying nothing. The Huntsman wrestled his sleek, restless beasts past him and went leisurely toward the dais, dropped to the divan there and smiled at his guest.

"You'll forgive my little trick in the hall," he said. "You were in no danger, of course."

Boyce felt a touch of Guillaume's arrogance creep into his own attitude as he faced the Huntsman.

"I knew that. I've begun to think I was in no real danger since I left Kerak, nor will be until you get whatever it is you want of me. I've walked through too many dangers already. It can't all have been accident."

THE Huntsman smiled.

"Sound reasoning. Do you know why?"

"Why I've been safe, you mean? Why everything has worked out as you meant it to? I think I do know. It must be that you have had a hand in it."

Under his tiger-striped hood the Huntsman's pale face lost its smile for a moment. A haunted look came into it. Boyce thought he caught just a glimpse there of the same desperation he had seen upon Irathe's face when she screamed her denial to him in the tower-room.

the Huntsman. Remember, it was my hand that kept you safe. You can't afford my enmity, I warn you. Godfrey Morel you shall see—and join, if you choose." He half-rose and the leashed beasts surged forward against their collars, their beautiful, mad faces wrinkled up in snarls. The Huntsman cuffed at them with his free hand and sank back again.

"No, wait. There's too much you do not know. If I show you the truth, I think you may decide to help. You've been deceived too often to take anyone on faith just now. Irathe, for instance—she told you a little, I think."

"A little." Boyce was wary. He saw a flicker of emotion on the Huntsman's face when he spoke Irathe's name, and he began to think he had a clue to part of the Huntsman's mystery. If Irathe brought that sick,

Next Issue: THE KINGDOM OF THE BLIND, by George O. Smith

"What do they say of me in Kerak?" the Huntsman asked unexpectedly.

"They say you're like the mist on the plains—blowing wherever the wind blows. But—" Boyce gave him a quick glance, "I think you know what they say in Kerak, Huntsman."

The face beneath the tiger-hood grimaced.

"You do know, then."

"I know I haven't been—call it alone—since I first saw you on the cliff when I entered this world."

The Huntsman flung back his head and laughed suddenly, his mercurial mood changing without warning.

"We won't quibble about it. Yes, it was I. And I did protect you here in the City—most of the time. There is something I want of you, William Boyce. You can repay me for my care by helping me—" he paused delicately—"to destroy Kerak's Oracle."

Boyce met the expectant eyes coldly.

"I owe you nothing."

"You owe me a great deal. You'll do my bidding in this—or would you like to see the punishment of Godfrey Morel, my friend?" The Huntsman's voice went thin in the last words, and the snarl sounded just beneath the surface.

"I came for that."

"You speak too coolly, William Boyce. You think because you've walked safely so far through this City, you can afford to defy

longing, angry look to other faces than his own, then he and the Huntsman had one thing at least in common.

"You knew her in your world," the Huntsman said. "You helped her in her work, which was—important. She left with you a certain talisman—a crystal, cold to the touch—that opens the gateway here. You used it, half by accident, I suspect, and came through the broken window on that cliff. I saw the flash the magic made from my tower here, and when I reached the cliff you were just awakening." He paused, a curious look flickering across his face.

"I meant to kill you then," he said. And Boyce suddenly recognized his look. Jealousy was in it. Yes, the Huntsman loved Irathe too, and hated her and himself because of it, and Boyce, because of—because of Boyce's year with her on Earth.

"I would have killed you on sight," he went on gently, his voice soft. "But I was not sure Irathe hadn't summoned you. Until you did not return my signal, I could not be sure. And by then—well, my mind changes easily, William Boyce. I indulge my fancies."

"I let you go because a better thought had come to me. So I drove you toward Kerak. I knew an attack was starting on the castle then—Jama's efforts have redoubled of late because he grows weary of the struggle and longs to end it."

"I thought to myself, 'He will die in Kerak

if the attack succeeds. Let him die. But if it fails, let him live and be my eyes and brain to spy out what I can of Tancred's secrets.' Because, you see, you wore the talisman, and I have power over that crystal as well as Irate. I made it for her, long ago, when she was—not as she is now."

This time a shadow crossed the Huntsman's face and Boyce saw the pale, strong features drawn up in a grimace almost of pain.

"I think she left that amulet to summon you by when she was ready, and I think you came too soon. I saw you too soon. When she learned of your presence here it was too late, for I had entered your mind already by power of the talisman and there was no room for her."

He laughed.

"She was wild when she learned that. She—but you do not know the secret of Irate, do you, William Boyce? You do not know why you remember her as all that was lovely and delightful, or why she is not now—herself. Well, you shall know. Better still—you shall see!"

He got up lazily, reins in the frantic beasts, and strolled to the wall at the head of the dais. He pulled a cord hanging among the dark draperies, and curtains swept back on both sides to uncover a wall of clear mirror glass, in which only blue-gray mists swam as if it were a window upon the plains.

"Tancred has a mirror like this," the Huntsman said casually. "But smaller. Now watch."

The mists rolled back on both sides. A room took shape in the glass, as vividly as if the mirror were a wall of the room, and that wall transparent. The room was gigantic, ringed with pillars that reflected themselves in the shining black floor.

The pillars marched up in a double line to a great throne at the far end, black, hung with scarlet. A man sat on the throne, light catching in the crown he wore. He was not young, and he was bending forward eagerly in his robe of yellow satin, stroking a dark beard and watching.

Boyce closed his eyes suddenly and whirled on his heel, his back to the mirror. He was shaking and the sweat felt cold on his forehead.

The Huntsman laughed softly.

"Yes, I know. They are not good to look at. But watch if you can, my friend. They wear robes, so you need not look them in the face. And this they do is important to my story—and to you."

CHAPTER XII

A Cure for Sorcery

SLOWLY, his body rigid, Boyce turned back to the mirror. He could not look directly at Them, but by watching the corners of the picture and keeping his jaw set hard and his fists clenched, he managed to control his shaking and to see what went on in the mirrored room.

They were only two, tall, robed figures hidden entirely from sight, but moving with an impossible liteness that somehow set the teeth on edge. They were walking—gliding—about a circle of glittering stones laid upon the black floor before the throne. Their robed limbs moved now and then in gestures of ritual.

"The Sorcerer King," the Huntsman said, "is a man hungry for power. He loves power and knowledge for their own sakes. He guides this City along the drifting lands as ships are guided in other worlds, seeking new people and new places and new sources of power. Also, he picks up other treasures.

"When he was younger, he found one treasure he prized highly—a lovely fair-haired woman in outlandish garments, wearing a cross emblazoned on her bosom. She came from a castle built high on the cliffs of certain mountains the City was then drifting near. The King was pleased with her and took her into his household.

"You know that story. She bore him a daughter and then died. He loved the daughter, but he did her a terrible wrong. He had not guessed how what he did would affect himself or her, or many people he had not then heard of. The daughter was a lovely creature. Also she was wise and skilled in many arts. When the King came across a source of power and knowledge beside which all he had discovered before seemed tame, he shared the discovery with his daughter.

"There was one trouble only. That source—those who knew what he wished to share—were so alien that eyes like ours can not bear to look upon Them. They live in another city, traveling these drifting lands, but very far from here.

"A few of their travelers chanced into our City, and the King was enthralled by Them, but he had no way of communicating with Them. For one thing, not even he could bear

to look Them in the face or listen to their voices. And yet he could not bear to give up commerce with Them altogether.

"They told him of one way only by which they might communicate. A very old way. Almost all peoples have it, and all old legends. It means the sacrifice of a maiden.

"She would have to submit herself to their sorcery, and thereafter would serve as liaison between the two peoples. The human mind, They said, was too complex, too hybrid, to deal with minds like Theirs. Their sorcery would change the mind of their instrument, dividing it in a way to make communication possible. They did not tell us, then, what else the sorcery might do.

"The King chose his daughter for that sacrifice. This thing meant more to him even than she, and she was the one alone, he thought, whom he could trust in a position of such power. Too, I think their kinship was to help in the transmission of knowledge from Them to the King.

"It happened without my knowledge. I loved the King's daughter very deeply. I should have interfered, had I guessed. But I came just as the ceremony was beginning, and until it was too late I did not know—"

He turned his back to the mirror and struggled with his beasts, bending over them as if he did not want to see that scene again.

"Look," he said.

They moved with intricate, hideously lithe steps about the circle of fiery stones. There was a veiled figure in the center of the circle now, and the King was leaning forward, a look of pain and eagerness on his face.

Fire leaped from the shining circle on the floor. It blazed to a pyramid of white light, and when it sank again the veil had vanished from the girl in its midst. She looked out with blank, unseeing eyes, violet under an iron crown. Her dark hair lay in ringlets on her shoulders.

She had a lovely, soft mouth and even now, a look of vividness and a delicate, familiar beauty which made Boyce lean forward suddenly and catch his breath, forgetting even the figures parading around the fire with snake-like motions of their robed arms.

"Irathe—" he heard himself whisper.

The fire leaped again. Through it the slim, crowned figure was faintly visible. It shimmered before his eyes, curiously unfocused inside the screen of flame. It divided, drew apart.

The fire sank. There were two figures inside the burning ring. But only for a moment. Then Irathe swept up her skirts in one smooth motion and stepped over the low-burning flames. Her eyes were violet-bright, the color of the fire. Her face was dazzling with a beauty more burning than the old Irathe ever knew. But danger was in the face now, danger and a fierce, unstable joy.

BEHIND her a motionless girl stood in the enchanted ring. Not a girl—a marble figure, pale as stone, drained of all life, the marble hair lying upon the marble shoulders, the marble robes sweeping straight to the floor. Hands clasped before her, eyes closed, serene and empty, the figure of Kerak's Oracle had taken shape in the ring and remained there while Irathe stepped lightly away from all that remained of her old self.

It was the same face—if it could be, when all that meant life had been drained from it. Boyce saw now that he might have known those marble features in Kerak—or could he have known them, in that inhuman repose, without the spark which meant Irathe glowing behind them? His memory had been too imperfect then. He had not known her face or her name, and nothing about the lifeless Oracle's features had reminded him of her other self.

The Huntsman, still bending to stroke the head of one snarling cat-creature, spoke as if to the beast, his voice soft.

"I had loved her before the—change. How could I stop loving her, afterward? And there was nothing left alive in the good half for a man to love, so it had to be Irathe as she is now—evil, terrible to the mind and the eye and most so for a man like me who can see beneath the surface. But to my heart, she is still Irathe, and my love."

Suddenly he slapped the snarling beast across the face. It twisted its head with cat-like quickness and slashed at his wrist with bared fangs. The Huntsman laughed and cuffed it aside.

"They could not destroy the marble image which was all that remained when that half of Irathe's mind which was good and sinless split from the half which was evil, knowing too much of magical things. Irathe wanted to destroy it. The sight of it seemed to madden her. She was not Irathe now and the knowledge of her own incompleteness was more than she could bear with that marble

thing as a reminder.

"They were indifferent. They had what they wanted; they would not help further. So Irathe, thinking to get the white marble being out of her sight and memory, drove it into the drifting lands and hoped she might forget it.

"The gods alone know what thoughts move in that still, stone mind. But some memory of her mother's people led her to Kerak, and they took her in. Then Irathe sent a cage of fire to keep her imprisoned, hoping the City would drift away and rid her forever of that shape which had been herself.

"But it was not so easy. The two halves of her were not wholly parted. A bond between them remained, a bond so strong that while it stretches between Kerak and the City, the two are anchored together and cannot drift apart. That means, of course, that Irathe must conquer Kerak's Oracle. She does not know the way. She has worked a long, long while on that secret.

"By now she is very wise—far wiser than I. I think she knows the answer which will mean the conquest of her other half. But the Oracle, too, is wise. And Tancred, Kerak's magician, is a rival in some ways even for Irathe. So she could not gain an entrance into Kerak—until she found you."

Boyce broke in abruptly, cutting off the slow, reminiscent voice that seemed to be watching the past unfold as it spoke on.

"You're lying," he declared, with all of Guillaume's arrogance. "I knew her too." He hesitated. He would not say, "I loved her too." That was a matter between him and the real, complete Irathe, if ever they met again. But once they had met—be was sure of that—and she had been whole.

"I know you did." The Huntsman gave him one glance under the tiger-striped hood, and hatred and envy was in the glance. But his voice was calm. "You knew her as I did, in one of her moments of completion. You see, there are certain times when the cage of flame does not prison Kerak's Oracle. The time is now, Boyce."

The dark eyes were sombre.

"You have listened to me, William Boyce, because I had information you needed. But why do you suppose I troubled to make these explanations?"

Boyce hesitated. But before he could speak he sensed a change in the Huntsman's face,

bright and triumphant as lightning flickering across a leaden autumn sky.

And suddenly Boyce knew his mistake. He had a flash of keen regret, the knowledge that he had, somehow, walked blindly into a trap—and then, for an intolerable instant of spinning vertigo, the walls before him tilted and slipped sidewise and dissolved into roaring chaos.

Tumbling mists shrouded him. Another mind, another power, was using him as a man's hand wields a machine. His body, his eyes, his thoughts, were not his own now. Briefly he crouched in a timeless, lightless place, the deepest citadel of his self, where no intruder could reach.

The monstrous claustrophobia slackened—was gone.

HE STOOD again before the laughing Huntsman.

Thick, wordless sounds spewed from his lips as he tried to speak. The Huntsman's eyes were ablaze with triumph.

"Is it hard to use your tongue, Boyce?" he mocked. "That will not last long. In a moment the feeling will pass. When a man has been out of his body it is not always easy to return."

Boyce hunched his shoulders, feeling such anger as he had never known before against this sorcerer who could use him at will as a man dons a glove and doffs it.

He felt warmth beginning to return to his limbs, though he had not felt their coldness till now.

"You—"

"Speak! You have done me a great service, Boyce. I owe you an honest answer, at least."

"What have you made me do?"

The Huntsman sobered. And now his eyes glittered with something very much like madness.

"You have done an errand for me. Not your body—but another part of you, your mind, your soul, perhaps. I sent that to Kerak a moment ago. Have you forgotten my words? This is one of the brief cycles during which the Oracle is free of her cage of flame."

"What did you do?"

"I used you to summon the Oracle here. Free from her cage, she can go where she wills—but the spell of emptiness holds her, even now. She comes to the City now, because you called her, Boyce."

BOYCE spoke hoarsely "Why should she come to my call?" "Should a woman not come when her lover calls? When her husband summons?" The Huntsman dwelt on the words, as he would have gripped the sharp blade of a dagger. What showed on his face was pure jealousy.

Lover? Husband? But it was Irathe who had come to earth—

"I will give you death if you like," the Huntsman said quietly. "It is best of all. Better than life. Perhaps in death you may join Kerak's Oracle."

That passion-drained calm, more than the Huntsman's previous mockery, roused Boyce. He thought—with a breath this sorcerer can drive me as a wind drives a leaf. But—

"Curse your magic!" Boyce roared. The ice had gone from his limbs. The fire of rage melted the paralyzing chill.

For so long had the Huntsman duelled with the rapiers of magic that he had apparently forgotten more primitive methods of battle. Boyce's fist smashed home on the man's jaw, a solid, vicious blow that jolted his arm clear back to the shoulder.

He did it almost without reason, driven only by a sudden, instinctive revolt against the cobweb-soft, clinging bonds of enchantment that had wound about him since he had entered this alien world—and even before that.

To have the Huntsman use him, mind and body, with that contemptuous disregard for his own demands, was suddenly unendurable. And that molten, rising rage culminated in the blow that caught the Huntsman by surprise and sent him crashing back, stunned, against the wall.

"Magic!" Boyce said, his voice a snarl of hatred. "There's the cure for that!"

But the Huntsman could not answer. He was a crumpled, silent figure, red blood trickling down his jaw.

A wordless, eerie cry made Boyce turn. He had forgotten the pack. The tiger-cats were shifting uneasily, their bright, dappled bodies sliding soundlessly in an intricate pattern, backward and forward. The beautiful mad faces watched him.

He glanced quickly around the room. A breath of wind rippled down a tapestried hanging bright with black and gold. Boyce took a cautious step in that direction.

And another. Still the pack hesitated.

Boyce reached the tapestry and slipped

beneath it. As he had guessed, there was an opening in the wall. A metal door was ajar, and a soft wind blew on his sweating face.

Mournfully, with inhuman sweetness, from the room he had left rose a wailing scream from a beast's throat. It was echoed and reechoed.

Boyce put his shoulder to the door and slammed it shut. There was no bolt, only a latch that could be lifted from either side. If the Huntsman recovered—

Boyce's teeth showed in an unpleasant grin. His heavy shoulders squared.

He turned to stare down the dim, blue twilight of the tunnel.

CHAPTER XIII

The King Is Dead

BRIEFLY he thought that the walls were hung with arabesque curtains. Then he saw them more clearly. Bas-relief carvings had been laid with a lavish hand on these walls. It was a design of roots, or branches—or, perhaps, serpents—intertwined in a jungle tangle that the eyes could not follow. The stone was varicolored, marked with brighter striations, glittering with mica and gem-chips. The passage seemed to be walled and roofed with a twining barrier of twisting roots.

A faint bluish light filtered through the tiny interstices between the carvings, as though they had been overlaid on a surface that held a light of its own.

Some instinct made Boyce move his hand to his hip, but the sword was gone, taken from him, no doubt, during his captivity to Irathe. But he did not want to think of her.

He could not go back. And the Huntsman might soon wake, unless the blood-scent had roused the pack to hunger.

Quietly Boyce moved along the passage. The twining coils on the wall and ceiling were motionless. Yet a feeling of tingling awareness, of the presence of some monstrous danger, never left him for a moment. As though he walked close beside a veil that might at any moment be ripped aside, that already rippled with a little wind that blew from an unknown and very terrible place.

Nerves—well, he had reason to feel nervous! His harsh grin broadened. To be plunged from his normal life into the maze

of ancient, alien sorcery and intrigue—suitable enough for a Norman of Guillaume's era, who walked amid witches and warlocks and Saracen magicians and believed in them devoutly. But Boyce did not believe. What a superstition-reared Crusader might accept blindly, a modern man could not.

Perhaps, Boyce thought, he had been accepting too much on faith. He should have questioned more from the beginning. Yet his mind had not been entirely his own. He had been, for the most part, a tool in Irathe's skilled hands, and the Huntsman's.

The stone carving of a beast's head was set amid the tangled root-carvings at his right. The stone eyes watched blindly. Into it—through it—the glittering coils seemed to grow.

Still the silence deepened.

He went on. There were more carvings to left and right. Some were animal, others human.

In the end he paused for a moment before one of the stone masks. He studied it. A root grew through the jaw, deforming the face curiously, but it was carved from a different material than the other gray, granite masks Boyce had seen. And, under the coiling tendrils, he could trace the shadowy outline of a body.

The sculptor had even suggested the details of iris and pupil in the open eyes of the mask. It looked like. . . It was like. . .

The stone lips moved.

Painfully, half-articulately, with a dry, stone clicking that was infinitely horrible—the head spoke.

"Boyce," it groaned—and the stone tongue clicked on the name against stone teeth. "Boyce!"

Now Boyce knew the face, and realized what end had come to Godfrey Morel. Though the end had not yet quite come.

HE REACHED for the loathsomely clinging root-carvings, but that inhuman voice halted him.

"Stay! Do not touch the walls! Do not!"

Boyce knew that he was shivering. He licked his dry lips.

"Godfrey," he said. "What—Isn't there—"

"Listen," Godfrey Morel said with his stone tongue. "Very soon I shall be—silent. Before then. . ." The clicking died.

"What can I do?" Boyce asked hoarsely. "Those things—"

"I am part of them already," Godfrey

said. "Part of it. It is a plant. Hell-spawned. A devil's plant. Here are its roots, but through all the City, within the walls, beneath the floors, the tendrils have grown secretly. It is Jamai's plant—his spy."

"Jamai?"

"A devil-thing," Godfrey said, his voice strengthening. "With its aid he knows all the City's secrets. Within the walls its tendrils grow—listen—see—and when, Jamai comes here, it answers his questions. I have seen that happen! It must be fed sometimes on the brains of living things, or it will relapse into an ordinary plant. He made it, long ago—with his sorceries."

Sorcery? It was easy to accept that explanation, in this haunted blue twilight, but since Boyce had seen the Huntsman's vulnerability, he was not so ready to believe. There were tropisms in plants—hypersensitivity—plants that could, in effect, see and hear and sense vibrations. Even in Burbank's day the study of plant-mutations had been understood.

Under certain abnormal stimuli, such a monstrous thing as this was theoretically possible—a hypersensitive plant, amenable to directed control, that absorbed brain-tissue and perhaps the energy of the mind itself. A specified plant that could be controlled like a machine!

Theoretically it was possible. But that did not lessen the horror of the monstrosity. Boyce felt faintly sick as he stared at the chalky, stiff face on the wall above him.

"I am nearly a part of—this thing," Godfrey Morel said. "I have learned—something of what it knows. Only in a few parts of the City does counter-magic keep this hell-thing away. It cannot enter the King's palace."

"The Oracle comes here. Jamai will try to kill her. Irathe—hates the Oracle. There is one power in the City that . . ." The voice stopped. After a moment it began again, less clearly.

"Hard to—speak. Go to the King. I think—he can help—hates Irathe as she—hates him. Tell him—Jamai is bringing the Oracle here. . ."

"Wait," Boyce said. "It's the Huntsman—"

"You have just come—from Jamai."

"No. Godfrey, you're wrong. I've come from the Huntsman."

"The Huntsman—is Jamai. The same. . ."

A cry burst thickly from the mask's gaping mouth.

"Under the dragon mask—secret way! To

the King—quick! Quick!”

The face was stone!

“Godfrey,” Boyce said—and then shouted the name. “Godfrey!”

Stone eyes stared at him.

Silence himmed the blue tunnel.

Boyce went on. The sickness was still deep within him, but the fact that now he had some sort of goal gave him strength. He had learned little enough from Godfrey Morel, but he guessed that the King of this haunted city might be a friend. Or, at least, an enemy of his enemies.

Irathe and the Oracle were the same—or had been, once. The Sorcerer King might hate Irathe, but would he hate the Oracle?

And the Huntsman—Jamai? Boyce tried to understand that. It seemed meaningless. Why should the Huntsman masquerade as Jamai, or vice versa? Why. . .

Huntsman or Jamai or both, if the man recovered from Boyce's stunning blow, he would pursue. And with the pack. Boyce moved faster along the blue passage.

In the end he found the dragon mask. It was stone. No such creature had ever existed on Earth. It was the prototype of ancient woodcuts Boyce had seen, though how the artists had found their source he could not guess. The monstrous, snarling mask loomed above him, jutting out into the passage, blocking it so that he had to sidle past carefully to avoid touching the glittering walls with their festoons of roots.

Knowing what he did now, Boyce was more anxious than ever to avoid contact with the bright, unmoving tendrils that were the hungry roots of the plant-mutation Jamai had created.

THE dragon mask was enormous, its lower jaw resting on the stone floor, its scaled snout three feet above Boyce's head. He could have walked into that incredible, gaping mouth. All around the mask grew the roots. If a secret way existed here, Boyce wondered how it could be opened without touching the walls. Perhaps here the twining coils were harmless—but he did not think so. When his shoulder brushed those bas-relief festoons, his flesh shrank.

All around the dragon-mask the tendrils coiled. But within that yawning mouth. . .

He peered in. The blue glow did not penetrate far. Surely, if this were the opening to another passage, the Huntsman—Jamai—would have discovered it before this.

Shrinking a little, he stepped into the dragon's mouth. Before him now he could see a curtain of the stony roots—the wall. Disappointment flooded him.

As he turned to step out, the irregular surface beneath his feet betrayed him. He stumbled, caught blindly at the nearest object—

He caught himself, but too late. His hand had touched the wall.

It had not! There had been no feeling of substance against his palm. That meant—

Gingerly he reached out again. The wall was visible, but intangible. His hand and arm melted through those stony tendrils he could see only dimly.

He put out a tentative foot. There was a floor beyond the wall.

He stepped through the barrier into a soundless, lightless blackness.

That lasted only for an instant. Almost immediately he was conscious of swift motion. Wind blew against him strongly. Yet the movement was erratic, as though he stood in a car that was racing in a secret path through the heart of the City, bound for a destination he could only guess. Had the King built this—whatever it was—so he could spy on Jamai?

The swift motion halted. Light came, pale and colorless. Boyce stood in a tiny, featureless cubicle like a small elevator. Only for a moment did the white walls prison him. Then a gap widened before him.

Before him was the throne-room of a King—or a god!

It was the room the Huntsman had shown him in a vision. Double pillars marched the length of it to the great black and scarlet throne at the end, where a crowned figure sat motionless.

But now there was more to see than the Huntsman's glass had revealed. The room was enormous, and in place of roof and walls a gigantic hemisphere, transparent as glass, covered it like a bubble. Below, Boyce could see the domes and smaller places of the Sorcerers' City. Mists shielded the distances, but there was a brief glimpse, gone before he could focus on it, of Kerak, gray and small in the distance, on its crag.

He had eyes only for the King, the same bearded figure, crowned and robed in yellow, that he remembered from the vision.

Warily he walked forward between the great columns. He could see his reflection in the shining black floor—not his own re-

flection, but that of Guillaume du Bois, scowling and scarred. Guillaume himself would have wanted a sword's hilt in his hand at this moment and, curiously, Boyce felt his own palm itch for the same comforting feeling. But he was unarmed.

The man on the throne made no move. His eyes watched Boyce. There was no sound but the heavy tread of Boyce's feet.

Closer he came, and closer. He stood before the throne.

"Go. Go at once," the king said. His voice held no shadow of emotion. It was utterly cold, completely depersonalized.

Boyce swallowed. He shook his head stubbornly. King or no king, sorcerer or scientist or man, he would not go until—

"Go at once. You will be summoned when I am ready. Go now."

BOYCE set his jaw and took a step forward. The man on the throne lifted a hand in warning. And now Boyce was able to see, as the wide sleeve was raised, that across the King's knees lay a bared sword, shining with cold steely radiance. But the King did not touch the sword.

"If you come closer to me, you will die," the dispassionate voice said.

The yellow robe was stretched taut against the King's breast. A design was embroidered there, a pattern of hieroglyphics Boyce could not read. His attention was drawn briefly to that design—and he stared, not quite believing what he saw.

Then he took another step forward. The man on the throne did not move, even when Boyce laid his palm on the satin robe.

There was no heart-beat. Through the yellow, thick fabric, the chill of cold flesh was perceptible.

Even then, Boyce could not believe until he held the steel sword-blade to the King's lips. That mirror surface did not cloud.

"You are the first man in this world to learn the truth," Irathe's voice said. "No one else would have dared approach the throne." Her laughter sounded as Boyce turned, shifting his hand from the sword's blade to its hilt.

She stood near him, her red mouth smiling, her eyes faintly mocking. She wore a long robe now, and the iron crown was on her head. The black floor reflected her, and Boyce remembered the vision the Huntsman had shown him—a woman sundered, broken into two women—Irathe and the Oracle—

by an unknown science.

"Yes, the Oracle of Kerak," she said. "I think I have won this game, even though Jamai threw the dice first. I'd never hoped for this much—that I could bring the Oracle here. Jamai has nearly earned my gratitude."

Boyce looked at her coolly. He took out the crystalline gem and cradled it in his palm.

"I think this gives you power over me, Irathe," he said. "Suppose I smash it?"

"If you like," she said indifferently, shrugging. "You can't return to your own world without it. And I have not as much power over you as you think."

She nodded toward the King.

"I could destroy you now, if I wanted. But I may need you. You've fulfilled my purpose. You've also found out that the King, my father, is dead, and that must be kept secret, unless—"

"Dead?"

"He died long ago."

"After you were made into two women?" Irathe looked at him steadily.

"So you know that. The Huntsman, I suppose—Jamai. Yes, it was after that that my father died. He tried to use knowledge that only They can use. So he died."

"But I have certain skills of my own. The King died, but a body can be controlled, like a mind, by an outside source. For my purposes, the King had to remain alive." She smiled again. "Call it hypnosis. Or believe that the body on the throne before you is a robot. I can control it, make it act and speak as I wish."

"You were controlling it just now?" Boyce said.

"No. It automatically says and does certain things when anyone enters here. It spoke to you, eh? Had you been a man of the City, you would have obeyed and fled. Even Jamai has never dared approach the King."

"I'll keep the crystal, Irathe. I mean to go back—when I can. But stay out of my mind! You and the Huntsman."

Irathe moved her slim shoulders in a gesture Boyce could not interpret.

"Jamai? What devils move him, I wonder, beside the devils of his own mind? I think he is mad. When the Oracle and I were one, he loved me. Then, afterward—he still loved me, but it was not enough. Do you know why?" She looked at Boyce through her lashes, half-smiling.

Yes, he knew. Old legends had given him the answer, stories of angel and demon battling for a man's soul. The allegory of Jekyll and Hyde, and a hundred other such tales.

CHAPTER XIV

Ice and Fire

FOR Irathe was evil. Not immoral—on the contrary, she was completely free, unshackled by any bonds of conscience or remorse or empathy. She was as amoral as the inhuman creatures which had created her from a whole woman.

Good and evil, inextricably mingled in the human mind, each a check and balance upon the other—necessary to each other. And never to be separated, except by a science utterly behind the comprehension of man.

But that separation had taken place. The Oracle, no less than Irathe, was monstrous. Psychiatry had dealt with cases of schizophrenia, split personality, in which there were two inhabitants of a single mind. Sometimes one personality was pure as a saint, the other utterly vicious and evil.

But here the fission was complete. The negative and positive in the girl's mind and soul and body had been separated. No man, Boyce thought, could love Irathe without going mad. For he knew now that she was not human.

"Yes," he said quietly. "I know why the Huntsman couldn't—why it isn't enough. When I loved you, Irathe, you weren't like this."

"No. Once each cycle, the Oracle and I blend for a little while. We are one again. But I still maintain my power. I am dominant; I have control—with certain restrictions. And while we are in one body thus, I cannot harm her without harming myself. Afterwards, when we separate again, I am traced for a while. By the time I recover, she is back in Kerak where I cannot reach her."

Boyce nodded.

"On Earth, then—"

"We were in one body. But I have been in many worlds. Only when we were in one body, because I needed her. I said I could not harm her here. The cage of fire, and

other things, prevent me. I could not reach her in Kerak."

"Do you want to kill her?"

He thought Irathe paled a little.

"No. She is part of me, even though we are in separate bodies. Harm to her would be harm to me. But I—I am not safe. Suppose she and I were made one again forever?"

She held up her hand to stop Boyce.

"No! As I am now, I want to be always! Free to do as I want! Free to open the gateways of the universe, if I wish—to rule, to wield power, to feel no sorrow! If she and I are one again, and I not dominant—her foolish emotions, her shallow conscience halting me from my will—no! I rule here!

"I know a way to prison the Oracle forever, where no one can reach her, and where she can never harm me. Till now I could not summon her from Kerak, except during the cycles when I dared not move because we were one."

"With you in control. I see. It wasn't you I knew on Earth, then—"

"You knew us both. In one body. I have searched through worlds and worlds, trying to find a key to Kerak, to the Oracle. For I had to gain entrance there and learn something of her secrets, something of how Tancred protected her and how strong he had become."

"As myself I could not go. Nor in the minds of any who would help me, for the Oracle can read men's minds." Her violet eyes looked at Boyce sidelong, slyly, with triumph in them.

"I found a way. I found a double way. At last the simple idea came to me that was easiest of all—to find someone she would love. She loved you, William Boyce. I knew that. She and I in a single body, forever divided in our minds, but sharing the same flesh—oh, I knew her thoughts! Something had touched her icy, frozen heart at last. I lingered in your world until I was sure. When her lover—her husband—called, I knew she would come."

Irathe's laughter was sweet and cold.

"I lingered until I knew I had awakened in you too the same fire. And until I was sure your mind held the knowledge of how to come here, and the passion to follow. But then—then, William Boyce, all your knowledge had to be erased from the surface of your memory. You see why."

"If you had gone into Kerak knowing what

you do now, the Oracle would have recognized her danger and Tancred would have done with you as he has done with many of my envoys. So when my work was finished—I summoned Them to my aid. I knew Their presence was enough to drive all memory of me and of our year together deep, deep into the wells of the subconscious in your mind.

"If you are wise, you'll leave them there! My purpose is served now. Though Jamai tricked me and used the crystal you carry to invade your mind before me, yet he has done my work. The Oracle comes blindly into my hands! Soon now, soon, the long wait will be ended!"

She smiled at him sweetly.

"I want your help," she said. "I have told you that each cycle the Oracle and I become one again. In the past I have been dominant. But she grows stronger. Some day, I think, she may gain control—and find a way to conquer me. To make me subservient forever, in the same body with her. That must not happen. You will help me to prison her, if I need your help. And in return—"

SHE met his eyes squarely. Boyce leaned on the sword and waited, unsmiling. "Instead of an image of ice—something better. The whole, complete Irathe you can never know again. And that ice image—you would die of cold," she said, and suddenly laughed, a wild, reckless gleeful laughter that echoed shrilly from the pillars. "With me in your arms, William Boyce—you would not think of ice!"

She took another step toward him. He still leaned on the sword, conscious of the intense attraction he felt toward her, of the exotic appeal of her slim, vibrant body.

"Jamai tried that, didn't he?" he said softly.

Her mouth twisted. Her beauty failed for an instant as the mockery of a devil showed in her eyes.

"Yes, he tried," she said. "He had loved both of us, when we were in one body, before my father worked his magic with Them. It would have been better had I erased his memory, as I erased yours. For Jamai remembered me as I was, and yet he could not help but love me. And I am—what am I, William Boyce?"

The sword hilt was cold against his palms. He spoke hoarsely.

"I don't know. But I know you're some-

thing that never should have existed. A man—a woman—is supposed to be a mixture of good and evil, if that's the way to put it. Maybe the Crusaders weren't so superstitious when they wrote about lamias—demon-women. No man could love you, Irathe, without going mad. If the Oracle is ice, you are flame that destroys all it touches."

"Then Jamai is mad," she said. "Perhaps his mind split as my body and soul did. Perhaps he tried to create two selves, as They did to me. But only They have such power. When a mind splits thus, it is madness. Sometimes Jamai is Jamai and hates me and hates the Oracle and wishes to destroy us both.

"Sometimes he is the Huntsman, and does not care, and would not care if this world ended now. But he loved me before They worked their spell, and he is bound to me—to Irathe—by unbreakable bonds—and he must die. I cannot trust that windvane mind of his."

She put out a hand and touched the sword Boyce held.

"You will help me. If you can have nothing else—am I not desirable? Look upon this frozen love of yours—and decide."

Her arm swept out. Boyce's gaze followed the gesture.

Down the long pillared avenue toward the throne, the Oracle of Kerak came slowly. Her hands were clasped before her, her eyes were still closed, the marble hair lay smoothly upon the marble shoulders. She walked serenely, surely, toward him as if her mind had clearer vision than her unseeing eyes.

And now he could see that these two women were indeed the same. Fire and ice, good and evil—and more than that. Deeper than simple morality. It was positive and negative, each complete—and each unearthly!

But the good was less earthly than the evil.

She came straight to where Boyce stood. She paused. And then, for the first time, he saw the lashes flicker on her cheeks. The white lids rose. Her eyes were blue—ice blue, the color that lingers deep within frozen bergs. But more than ice was here now.

Far down, deeply buried, he thought he saw a stirring of—life? Awareness? There was a mind within this icy statue, prisoned inside it as the body had been prisoned in fire until he called her under Jamai's command. And the mind—remembered.

Boyce was shaken to his depths. He loved

both women when they were one. Now they were two. In bewilderment he realized that each woman drew him, but in such different ways that for an instant he felt a shocking disorientation, as though the glass walls beyond him had drawn apart—more than that—as though he himself was being split into two parts.

Black garden of evil—scented with the poisonous perfume of flowers ablaze with sensuous color—promising untold desire fulfilled, a madness of ecstasy such as man had never known—

Goddess of shining crystal, pure and remote as the stars—a distant flame behind the cold blue eyes hinting at a love that was far and veiled by walls of ice—

Side by side they stood, those two who had been one.

And one promised more than any man had ever known.

You are my husband. You are my lover. You wedded me as well as that frozen goddess. We will walk through worlds of flame and color and sound, under seas of nameless planets, beyond the gates of space and time. Death or madness will not matter. We will plumb the last, uttermost limits of power and rule here like god and goddess.

But the distant ember behind the ice in the Oracle's eyes promised nothing. It asked nothing.

It said—I love you. And that was all.

IRATHE saw Boyce's face change. She saw him step forward and face her, guarding the Oracle with his own body. Bitter mockery made the red mouth ugly.

"You could have helped me," she said softly. "There is danger now, but since you will not aid there is no other way. This means your death—you fool!"

Her gaze focused beyond Boyce. She made a quick, intricate movement with her hands, while her whole slim figure tensed into a rigid statue. Then, instantly, she had relaxed.

"They are coming," she said. "I have summoned them before their time—before the cycle has been completed. There is danger in that."

Boyce shifted the sword in his right hand. Irathe laughed.

"A sword against—Them?"

"No," Boyce said. "Against you, Irathe."

The blade lifted—hung poised to slash her throat.

She faced him unafraid.

"What of your love, then? Harm me—and she will be harmed. Kill me, and she dies."

Boyce lowered the sword.

"Unless you're lying."

"Try it and see. Do you dare?"

"No," he said. "But I can go back to my own world, I still have that crystal. I can take her with me."

"Try it."

He turned away. The Oracle followed willingly enough, though her face was void of expression. He glanced back at Irathe, and saw something in her eyes that made him halt.

"Wait!" she said. "The crystal—"

He took a long stride back toward her, the sword raised again.

"I'd forgotten! You were trying to control me through it, weren't you? But—" He hesitated. "You couldn't do it. Is that it? You've lost your power!"

"Not while you live!" Irathe blazed at him. "I am not that weak!"

"You tried to control my mind," he said. "And it didn't work. Why?"

"There was something fighting against me. . . I have felt that ever since you came to the throne-room. I—listen!"

The air shivered around them. A thin, high keening sound rang in Boyce's ears, like that ringing in the head which cannot be shaken away. Now it grew louder, clearer. There was in it the tinkling of tiny bells. And a faint chill like no chill he had ever felt except when—

"They come!" Irathe cried. "Sooner than I thought. Oh, there's danger here for you both—for everyone but me!" Her laughter was high and triumphant and Boyce had the fleeting thought that in its sound he heard something of tinkling sweetness like the bells. They rang. Already she laughed with a voice like theirs.

The floor shook.

Irathe glanced at the Oracle, standing serenely, hands clasped, icy eyes upon Boyce with a flicker of fire behind the ice, as if memory might be flowing slowly, softly back into that frozen mind.

"The bond is weaker between Kerak and the City while she remains here," Irathe said abstractedly. "You feel that? A pitching like the roll of waves under the City? These lands have been pent up a long while as the City rode at anchor with Kerak for a mooring." She laughed again, recklessly.

"What a storm underfoot we should have if the mooring snapped!"

Darkness was gathering in the air of the room. Boyce glanced up and saw through the great glass dome above them a scurry of motion in the City, men and women hurrying to shelter in any palace or temple or tavern that would receive them. The streets were clearing for Them.

"Now we shall finish!" Irathe cried. "They come who made me into two—and who will enchain this One of me so that she can never again hope to control my mind." She leaned closer and her red lip curled up in a scornful smile as she gazed into her own face frozen to the color of ice and marble.

"You thought to rule me!" she said softly. "Oh, I knew your thoughts! Remember, we were one when this man loved us. I could feel your treachery moving beneath my own mind like snakes squirming underfoot. You thought to build up the power that could take control from me when we are next made one. Oh yes, I know why! It was love that woke your envy of my strength. Love for him. He's mine now.

"Listen—you hear the bells? They come, who split us into two—and will deal at my command with you! Prepare yourself, my sister—my more than sister! These moments are your last. Are you ready for the enchantment that will make you forever the marble thing you now only seem to be?"

CHAPTER XV

The Way Back

SHE swung to Boyce, her black hair flying wide. Her face was a blaze of triumph and joyous evil. Her eyes upon his were a violet flame in the darkness and the chill of the room. They sought his eyes, fixed there—he felt an irresistible pull as if she were drawing out his very mind through the meeting of their gaze. Blackness darker than the gathering gloom around them swam through his brain. And then—

Laughter echoed through the great hall.

They turned, even the Oracle. Boyce was dizzy for an instant at the sudden release of the bond between Irathe's gaze and his. Then he saw, down the long aisle, a motion among the pillars. As the wild laughter rang out again he saw the tiger-beasts of the Huntsman sliding toward them with their

beautiful pouring motion, golden eyes lambent in the dimness.

Behind them, leaning on the leash, the Huntsman came in his tiger-striped garments. Blood smeared his pale face, and he was laughing as he came—but not from mirth. Boyce remembered Irathe's words. Yea, it might be madness, that wild, mirthless sound that echoed among the pillars. But a cold madness, that knew its own power.

"It was you, then—in the crystal—fighting my will!" Irathe cried furiously. "You dared, Jamai!"

He came on, laughing deep in his throat.

"If? Was it Jamai? Or was it the Huntsman? I have two selves, Irathe, even as you. You should know that! William Boyce, I owe you thanks. Never before have I found the secret way to the throne. Till I looked into your mind through the crystal, I had not known that the King was dead. I had not even known that I was dead!"

"Jamai!" Irathe shrieked.

"Even you, Irathe, are vulnerable. You are afraid. All of us are afraid of something—death, or pain, or magic. Because you are sane—even you, Irathe—but I have lost my vulnerability. I had not known it before, but I know now.

"How can a man love good and evil—fire and ice—and stay sane? You were wise to make the choice you did. It meant death, but death is better than life. I made the other choice. I have followed Irathe through all the bells in all the universe!"

A shadow darkened above the crystal globe. The white mists gathered closer overhead, clustering about the hemisphere to hide the City's roofs below. Kerak, far and small, was hidden by the pallid veils.

"Jamai!" Irathe cried again, and he smiled.

"No, Irathe," he said, his voice dropping. "It is the end. I love you, and I love the Oracle. I will not see her enslaved to your evil will. I know what evil is in you.

"But I would not see her gain power over you again, because then she would look at me, and know the evil that has flowered within me since she saw me last. Both you and she must die, Irathe—and for all I care, all the worlds may die with you!"

Irathe's mouth curved. "I have summoned Them. You are too late—much too late."

The shadow was like thunderheads above the crystal roof, darkening the great room. Jamai roared with laughter.

"Let Them come!" he shouted. "Let Them

slay! I know the answer now—and it is Death! Kill and be killed! I am wiser than you all, for I am mad—and I say the answer is Death!"

It was almost too dark now to see, but Boyce could make out the sudden upward sweep of a tiger-striped arm, and the whip of the loosened leash. And he could see the instantaneous forward sweep of the two long, low, powerful bodies at the Huntsman's knee. His laughter seemed to madden them, and their screaming snarl of rage echoed the curious snarl in his own voice as they launched themselves forward toward the throne where the dead King sat.

Dimly Boyce saw the beautiful, screaming faces of the beasts, met the glow of their luminous eyes—and sprang forward before the Oracle, swinging his sword.

It was too dark to see the tiger-things, though they were almost upon him. It was too dark to see the two girls or the throne or the pillars, and the Huntsman's mad laughter rang disembodied through the blackness. There was a singing in Boyce's ears, a sound of tiny bells very near. . .

A bot-breathed snarl sounded in his face. He heard claws click on pavement as the beast launched itself at his throat. Of itself, the sword swung in his hands. It met hard, muscular resistance that held for a moment and then seemed to fall away, left and right over the razor-edge of the blade.

There was a sudden, hot reek of blood in the air, but he was scarcely aware of it. For now shadows moved through the dark, and it seemed to Boyce that his flesh moved with them, shudderingly, on his bones. Cold struck into his mind and his body, numbing, paralyzing. . .

AN ICY wind rushed past him, swaying the darklike curtains before it. Briefly, dimly, the dark parted. He saw in one terrible glancing flash a robed figure moving as no human figure ever moved.

He saw Irathe facing it, her arms flung high, her black hair swirling wide on the blast, her face dazzling. He saw one more thing—a second snarling figure before him, crouching for a leap; lips wrinkled back over curved fangs as it glared at him out of wild, mad eyes.

Then the darkness closed in again, like dropping curtains. Through it he could hear Irathe's voice, high and shrill, speaking words whose very sound was a meaningless

blasphemy to the ear. No human tongue was ever meant to shape such sounds.

The chant rose higher, thinner, like the were cramped like ice around the hilt of his ears and his brain except when the shriek of that icy wind drowned them out.

The cold was in his bones now. His hands were cramped like ice around the hilt of his sword. Hearing that feral snarl, he swung it up with infinite effort. A lithe, beast-smelling body thudded against him. Claws raked his thigh, and the snarl was in his very ear. Furiously, struggling against the cold, he flung it off, slashing downward—missed.

Now the chant of Irathe's strangely changed voice, resonant with that insistent hell-sound, filled all the darkness. And he sensed even through the cold and his confusion a motion among the robed, unseen figures—a motion he knew because his flesh told him by its shuddering shrink when They drew near.

With one last despairing effort he lifted the sword as he heard that snarl again. This time it struck home. The snarl was a howl. A body thudded to the floor and was silent. The figures were closing in around him, and he knew that when they reached him, he would die.

One last thing remained. He could not reach Irathe to silence her triumphant chant, but the Oracle stood at his back. He could reach her.

He could kill her.

She at least need never be captive again to the black evil of her twin self. And if the Oracle died—perhaps—Irathe too might die. It was a forlorn and desperate thing he meant to do, but he knew in his frozen horror and revulsion that it was best for them all.

She was very near, within reach of his arm. He touched her—for the first time. He had wondered often before now if she would be marble to the touch, cold, hard. She was not cold. For an instant it bewildered him, and then he knew. He was himself so paralyzingly cold in this unnatural icy dark that even marble might seem warm to him.

And as he drew her toward him, his arm closing about her shoulders, he felt her giving slowly, almost reluctantly, to his pull, her body bending as he brought her within reach of his sword.

He shortened his grip upon it. In the

deadly dark he laid its sharp edge against her throat.

She did not stir. But he could hear her quickened breathing.

Very gently he bent his head and kissed her for the first time and the last his conscious memory would ever know. And under his lips he felt warmth and life come slowly back into the Oracle of Kerak. Slowly, softly out of that distant place in which she had dwelt so long, the Oracle of Kerak returned to the world of the living.

Against his mouth her lips moved. Against his heart her heart stirred—beat more strongly. In his arms her body that had been marble relaxed into flexible, living flesh. The tie between them which Irathe herself had brought into being was a cord that drew her irresistibly through the gates of forgetfulness and enchantment. She stirred, sighed—

The spell broke!

She wrenched free and was gone into the darkness. And as she moved, it seemed to Boyce that Irathe's voice faltered. For an instant assurance went out of it and she stumbled in the midst of a phrase. Suddenly he thought he understood. They were the two halves of a single being.

Irathe in all her vivid aliveness had drained from that other self the very stuff of life itself. When living returned to the Oracle, it could come from no other source than Irathe. She must have felt her own power sink within her at the abrupt upward surge of strength in the Oracle.

Now suddenly in the icy darkness a new voice sounded—a clear, cool voice, very sure, chanting that blasphemous tongue which Irathe still spoke. Almost in chorus for a moment the two voices chanted, one cool and not strong, but gaining in strength, the other rich and high, brimming with passion—but fading a little as the new tones sounded through the dark.

But it was not a chorus. Strophe and antistrophe rang through the icy hall. And at the chant of that new, clear speech, Boyce thought the cold began to ebb a little. He could move again—not much, but a little. Blindly he stumbled forward.

VOICE fought against voice. The two who had been one woman battled in the dark. And Boyce knew now the truth behind that battle. For Irathe was not, after all, the one human creature who could command

them. She was only half of that one being who alone spoke. Their tongue with human lips. The Oracle too knew the chant, knew They must obey it. And in the dark the Oracle chanted on, her voice gaining little by little in volume as it strove with Irathe's.

Groping, Boyce touched something warm and breathing. Even in the darkness, he could not be mistaken who it was. He seized her waist, and Irathe struck out at him fiercely, pausing in her chant. The Oracle's voice soared instantly in the pause, strength surging up in it.

Boyce's arms swept around Irathe. Her nails ripped his cheek. He dragged her close, imprisoning her arms, one palm clamping across her mouth. It was like holding one of the tiger-beasts. Her knee drove up viciously; she writhed in his arms and he tightened his grasp until it seemed as though her ribs must collapse under the pressure. But she could not speak.

The Oracle's voice poured forth that inhuman chant, clear and strong. It was a command—and an entreaty.

Darkness was paling around them. Over Irathe's twisting head, Boyce saw robed figures moving in an intricate ritual about the marble-white girl whose voice still echoed through the room. He saw, and looked away, setting his teeth against the shudders that racked him whenever his eyes even glancingly crossed those hidden shapes.

But something was happening.

In his arms Irathe suddenly froze. Something brushed past, a touch that exhaled cold, and Boyce was for a moment weak with horror at the touch. Then a single ringing sound like a struck gong vibrated through the lifting dimness.

And from Boyce's arms he felt Irathe—melt . . .

When he could see again, the room was clear. He was not wholly aware of the great surging lift and fall of the floor beneath him, for one thing held his gaze like a spell of sorcery. And there was sorcery indeed in her violet eyes and the vividness of the smiling face beneath her iron crown.

"Do you know me now—my dear, oh, my dear—do you know me now?"

He was not sure of his own body any more. He took one forward step as the floor pitched beneath him, not daring to believe the strange evidence of his own stunned mind.

"We are one again now," the sweet, famil-

lar voice was saying. And he did remember, from long ago and from another world. His heart was beating suffocatingly as he crossed the heaving floor toward her, bolding out uncertain hands.

Her warm fingers clasped them. It was the face he knew tilting to his now—vivid and alive as Irathe, yes, potent for evil as Irathe—but not evil. All the strength was there, but under the control the Oracle had always known.

She thrust herself between his arms and laid the crowned head back to lift her lips to his, smiling as she had smiled so long ago, on Earth.

Yes, he remembered now. This was the real Irathe . . . !

The pitch of the floor beneath them interrupted the kiss. She drew back and looked anxiously about them.

"We must go," she said. "I wish—but unless you mean to stay here forever, we must go quickly."

He followed her glance. Through the crystal ceiling, clear now except for the drift of mist outside, he could see the City roofs and the mountains beyond them, with Kerak crowning the heights. And Kerak was slipping slowly backward. The mountains moved—no, not the mountains, but the City.

"The bond is broken," the girl in his arms said. He could not quite think of her as Irathe, though he knew it was truly her name now. "I'm no longer an anchor to hold the City here and the tide is pulling us out and away. What do you think we should do, William Boyce?"

He dropped one arm from her to touch his belt where a faint chill from the crystal struck through his clothing. Yes, it was still there.

"Go back," he said. "Back to Earth, if we can."

She nodded.

"Yes, I hoped for that. This City is no place for me now. My place is with you—if you want that?"

He grinned and dropped his head to reassure her, but she smiled, pushing him gently away.

"Later, later, my darling. We—look."

He turned his head. Then in an awed voice he said, "Jamai!"

And yet it was no startling thing he saw. Terrible, yes, and tragic, but somehow not strange in this strange and lawless place.

On the high throne of the Sorcerer King

the Huntsman sat. The King's yellow-robed body lay at his feet on the heaving floor. The Huntsman's chin was on his chest and his face was turned toward them as they stood before the throne. But the Huntsman's eyes did not see them. His eyes were fixed upon the bright face of madness and he saw no other sight.

They left him there, stumbling as they went over the pitching floor, his dead beasts lying about the throne and the dead King at his feet.

THROUGH the mist they stumbled, over ground that swelled and sank beneath their feet like the tides of a solid sea. Great gaps opened and closed again with a screaming of rock far underground. The depths groaned beneath them.

"Hurry!" Boyce heard himself gasp as the ground shook itself and rose in a mountainous billow that sank as they began the climb up its slope. "It isn't far now—only a little way. I remember that cliff. It's the one I came through."

"I think—it's steadier now," Irathe panted. "The ground—it's rising into the foothills here. Only the valley—flows."

Wreathed in mist, they climbed. And it was true that as the rocky hillside rose underfoot, the billowing subsided. Once they paused and looked back. Far away, gleaming with jeweled lights, glittering with enchantment, they saw the warlocks' City drifting like a ship into the misty distances, pitching on the land waves that surged in long quakes around it. And beyond the City, Kerak.

High on the crags, the great castle stood, its scarlet banner blowing above it like a flame. Other lands would drift through this valley at its feet. Other cities and people would know Tancred and Guillaume du Bois, who was Boyce's distant forebear and would never know it. Kerak, he thought, would sit through an uncounted forever on its crag while the drifting lands flowed slowly by, carrying unknown adventures past its gates.

They turned and climbed again.

"Here—no, farther. Here, I think." Boyce searched the ledges with anxious eyes. Incredible to think that just beyond one of them his own world lay. He caught a glint of something, and bent close to look.

"Yes, this is it. See, the glass I broke when I came through."

It lay on the ground in glittering fragments that cracked underfoot. Boyce fumbled in his belt, brought out the small, cold crystal whose chill struck into his palm as he held it.

"Wait," Irathe said. "The light—" She hesitated, then smiled suddenly at him. "I promised myself I would work no more sorcery. But for this one time, we have need of sorcery, my dear. See?"

She held up her hand, flexed the fingers once, twice. Then between thumb and forefinger she seemed to hold a tiny flame.

"Quick, while it burns!"

Boyce lifted the crystal. The fire struck through it, fell in shining patterns on the stone—sank into it. Slowly the window formed that was a gateway into other worlds.

Once more, for the last time, Boyce looked behind him. The City was a stain on the mist, far away, riding the quaking lands into new harbors, its lights glittering faintly through the fog. Grim, changeless, Kerak looked out across this strange world where

space was fluid and time was not.

Unknown enchanted cities would always drive past through the troubled earthquake lands among the pale mists. He would never know these cities.

His mind lingered for one last, strangely reluctant moment upon Kerak, where men of his own blood dwelt.

Then Irathe said, "Come—now!" and took his hand.

The crystal loomed up before them on the rock, with shadows behind it.

They felt the delicate, tinkling shatter of the glass. . . .

Shadow-tapestries swayed and rippled on the walls. Dim jewels gleamed from the unreal folds. But through the rich hangings the bare, dusty boards began to show.

The tapestries were gone. The empty, silent room was around them. Behind them the wall showed no trace of the crystal pattern.

From the distance came the sound of auto horns, and a newsboy's voice shouting.



"It's the Same Tragedy All Over Again—and All Because of the Lawson Radiation!"

DR. POLLARD regarded the patient solemnly. John Majors, the director of the laboratory, watched the proceedings with breathless anticipation. But the man who sat before them seemed utterly unable to answer the questions that were asked of him.

The physicist finally shrugged hopelessly. "This is no place for me," he said. "If I can do anything—"

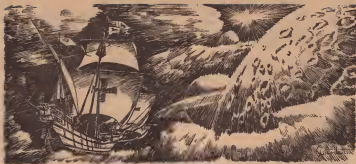
"You can do nothing, Majors," said Dr. Pollard. "As usual, this case is almost complete amnesia. Memory completely shot. He'll never be brilliant again. From I. Q. 180 down to about 70. That's tough to take. He'll have to make new friends for his old ones will find him dull."

John Majors shook his head in despair. "I'm going to abandon the Lawson Radiation. It gets us all. It's already taken four of my top technicians. Perhaps it's because the Lawson Radiation is no better understood now than it was thirty years ago!"

Astonishing consequences follow in the wake of a deep scientific mystery in **THE KINGDOM OF THE BLIND**, the amazing complete novel by George O. Smith coming in our next issue. It's a novel that will hold you spellbound as you follow its strange and compelling events—and at the same time fascinate you with its world-shaking scientific implications!

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Columbus Was a Dope

By ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

Proxima Centauri, here we come—on the good ship Pegasus!

I DO like to wet down a sale," the fat man said happily, raising his voice above the sighing of the air-conditioner. "Drink up, Professor, I'm two ahead of you."

He glanced up from their table as the elevator door opposite them opened. A man stepped out into the cool dark of the bar and stood blinking, as if he had just come from the desert glare outside.

"Hey, Fred—Fred Nolan," the fat man called out. "Come over!" He turned to his guest. "Man I met on the hop from New York. Siddown, Fred. Shake hands with Professor Appleby, Chief Engineer of the Starship Pegasus—or will be when she's built. I just sold the Professor an order of bum steel for his crate. Have a drink on it."

"Glad to, Mr. Barnes," Nolan agreed. "I've met Dr. Appleby. On business—Climax Instrument Company."

"Huh?"

"Climax is supplying us with precision equipment," offered Appleby.

Barnes looked surprised, then grinned. "That's one on me. I took Fred for a government man, or one of you scientific john-

nies. What'll it be, Fred? Old-fashioned? The same, Professor?"

"Right. But please don't call me 'Professor.' I'm not one and it ages me. I'm still young."

"I'll say you are, uh—Doc Pete! Two old-fashioneds and another double Manhattan! I guess I expected a comic book scientist, with a long white beard. But now that I've met you, I can't figure out one thing."

"Which is?"

"Well, at your age you bury yourself in this god-forsaken place—"

"We couldn't build the Pegasus on Long Island," Appleby pointed out, "and this is the ideal spot for the take off."

"Yeah, sure, but that's not it. It's—well, mind you, I sell steel. You want special alloys for a starship; I sell it to you. But just the same, now that business is out of the way, why do you want to do it? Why try to go to Proxima Centauri, or any other star?"

Appleby looked amused. "It can't be explained. Why do men try to climb Mount Everest? What took Peary to the North Pole? Why did Columbus get the Queen to

hook her jewels? Nobody has ever been to Proxima Centauri—so we're going."

Barnes turned to Nolan. "Do you get it, Fred?"

Nolan shrugged. "I sell precision instruments. Some people raise chrysanthemums; some build starships. I sell instruments."

Barnes' friendly face looked puzzled. "Well—" The bartender put down their drinks. "Say, Pete, tell me something. Would you go along on the Pegasus expedition if you could?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"I like it here."

Dr. Appleby nodded. "There's your answer, Barnes, in reverse. Some have the Columbus spirit and some haven't."

"It's all very well to talk about Columbus," Barnes persisted, "but he expected to come back. You guys don't expect to. Sixty years—you told me it would take sixty years. Why, you may not even live to get there."

"No, but our children will. And our grandchildren will come back."

"But—Say, you're not married?"

"Certainly I am. Family men only on the expedition. It's a two-to-three generation job. You know that." He bawled out a waiter. "There's Mrs. Appleby, with Diane. Diane is three and a half."

"She's a pretty baby," Barnes said soberly and passed it on to Nolan, who smiled at it and handed it back to Appleby. Barnes went on. "What happens to her?"

"She goes with us, naturally. You wouldn't want her put in an orphanage, would you?"

"No, but—" Barnes tossed off the rest of his drink. "I don't get it," he admitted. "Who'll have another drink?"

"Not for me, thanks," Appleby declined, finishing his more slowly and standing up. "I'm due home. Family man, you know." He smiled.

BARNES did not try to stop him. He said goodnight and watched Appleby leave.

"My round," said Nolan. "The same?"

"Huh? Yeah, sure." Barnes stood up. "Let's get up to the bar, Fred, where we can drink properly. I need about six."

"Okay," Nolan agreed, standing up. "What's the trouble?"

"Trouble? Did you see that picture?"

"Well?"

"Well, how do you feel about it? I'm a

salesman, too, Fred. I sell steel. It don't matter what the customer wants to use it for; I sell it to him. I'd sell a man a rope to hang himself. But I do love kids. I can't stand to think of that cute little kid going along on that—that crazy expedition!"

"Why not? She's better off with her parents. She'll get as used to steel decks as most kids are to sidewalks."

"But look, Fred. You don't have any silly idea they'll make it, do you?"

"They might."

"Well, they won't. They don't stand a chance. I know. I talked it over with our technical staff before I left the home office. Nine chances out of ten they'll burn up on the take off. That's the best that can happen to them. If they get out of the solar system, which ain't likely, they'll still never make it. They'll never reach the stars."

Pete put another drink down in front of Barnes. He drained it and said:

"Set up another one, Pete. They can't. It's a theoretical impossibility. They'll freeze—or they'll roast—or they'll starve. But they'll never get there."

"Maybe so."

"No maybe about it. They're crazy. Hurry up with that drink, Pete. Have one yourself."

"Coming up. Don't mind if I do, thanks." Pete mixed the cocktail, drew a glass of beer, and joined them.

"Pete, here, is a wise man," Barnes said confidentially. "You don't catch him monkeying around with any trips to the stars. Columbus—Pfu! Columbus was a dope. He shoulda stood in bed."

The bartender shook his head. "You got me wrong, Mr. Barnes. If it wasn't for men like Columbus, we wouldn't be here today—now, would we? I'm just not the explorer type. But I'm a believer. I got nothing against the Pegasus expedition."

"You don't approve of them taking kids on it, do you?"

"Well . . . there were kids on the Mayflower, so they tell me."

"It's not the same thing," Barnes looked at Nolan, then back to the bartender. "If the Lord had intended us to go to the stars, he would have equipped us with jet propulsion. Fix me another drink, Pete."

"You've had about enough for a while, Mr. Barnes."

The troubled fat man seemed about to argue, thought better of it.

"I'm going up to the Sky Room and find somebody that'll dance with me," he announced. "G'night." He swayed softly toward the elevator.

Nolan watched him leave. "Poor old Barnes." He shrugged. "I guess you and I are hard-hearted, Pete."

"No. I believe in progress, that's all. I remember my old man wanted a law passed about flying machines, keep 'em from breaking their fool necks. Claimed nobody ever could fly, and the government should put a stop to it. He was wrong. I'm not the adventurous type myself but I've seen enough people to know they'll try anything once, and that's bow progress is made."

"You don't look old enough to remember when men couldn't fly."

"I've been around a long time. Ten years in this one spot."

"Ten years, eh? Don't you ever get a hankering for a job that'll let you breathe a little fresh air?"

"Nope. I didn't get any fresh air when I served drinks on Forty-second Street and I don't miss it now. I like it here. Always something new going on here, first the atom laboratories and then the big observatory and now the Starship. But that's not the real reason. I like it here. It's my home. Watch this."

He picked up a brandy inhaler, a great fragile crystal globe, spun it and threw it, straight up, toward the ceiling. It rose slowly and gracefully, paused for a long reluctant wait at the top of its rise, then settled slowly, slowly, like a diver in a slow-motion movie. Pete watched it float past his nose, then reached out with thumb and forefinger, nipped it easily by the stem, and returned it to the rack.

"See that?" he said. "One-sixth gravity. When I was tending bar on earth my bunions gave me the dickens all the time. Here I weigh only thirty-five pounds. I like it on the Moon."

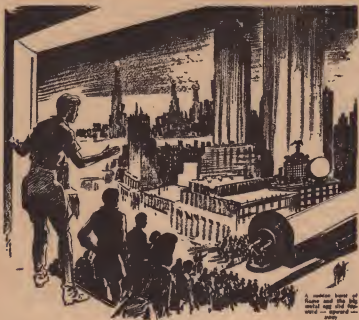


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A million bursts of flame and the big metal egg did spread — spread — away

A Hall of Fame Novelet

THE DISC-MEN

EDITOR'S NOTE: Those who read Mr. Wellman's Hall of Fame novelet, "When Planets Clashed," in our previous issue will welcome this continuation of the adventures of our Martian and Terrestrial astronauts.

In this exciting sequel Rolf Bromburg leads humanity's first expedition to the outer planets—to face ruin, first from a girl's mad caprice, then from a grimmer alien species!

CHAPTER I

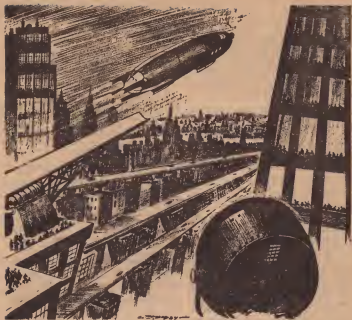
Party With Dreams

THE year was 2698, the hour was midnight, the place was Ekadonn, City of the Martian rulers. In a gorgeous pleasure apartment, high up on the cliff-like face of a towering building that loomed above the

intersection of three canals, an orgy was in progress.

The spacious, high-domed room was brilliantly lighted by a ray that constantly changed color, now red, now green, now violet. This was the noted "joylamp," invented by a mad scientist to administer a new and unheard-of intoxication to all who came into its light. Beneath it divans were spread and cushions heaped, and on these lolled the pleasure seekers.

They drank potent liquors of both Martian and Terrestrial distillation. They listened to the fascinating music. They looked at the three television screens on the walls, where were presented three entertaining dramas—one a whimsical, intellectual comedy, one a historical romance of ancient Mars, one a



OF JUPITER

By
MANLY WADE WELLMAN

stark, horrible thing that made the head swim and the heart race.

The majority of those present were lean, mahogany-colored Martians, their bulging eyes and grinning teeth flashing against the darkness of their thin-drawn, almost mummy-like faces. Here and there were Terrestrial men and women, easily recognizable by their more robust physiques, lighter complexions and softer contours of face and figure.

The music grew louder and wilder, the three shadowy dramas flashed away into nothingness, and from a black well in the center of the room rose a platform. On it was the writhing form of a Martian dancing

girl. So fast were her rhythmic movements that she seemed to shimmer, to sprout new arms and legs, to turn into two or three dancers.

Her performance was greeted with a storm of applause and all watched closely. The ever-changing rays of the joy-lamp shone down, bringing wickedly delightful thrills to every soul there, even to the young man by the door who wished he had not come.

He was a Terrestrial, perhaps twenty-five years old, more than six feet tall and of a sinewy slimness. His clear-cut, tanned features and the unruly locks of tawny hair above were somehow familiar to every beholder, although nobody knew him save the

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companion who had brought him and to whom he now turned.

"I wouldn't have come if I'd have known it was to be like this, Duvelskoe," he said.

"Why—what's there to be afraid of?" protested the other. He, too, was a Terrestrial, shorter and sturdier than the first speaker. His face was young and handsome and laughing, topped with black curls and framed in long sideburns that added to its look of virile audacity.

"What's to be afraid of?" he repeated. "The best people of both worlds go to these parties. One doesn't think of them as folks would on Earth. I wouldn't have brought you here if it had been wrong."

"It's just that I'm not used to it," persisted the tall youth. "Later, perhaps, when I've made my report to headquarters and found out about my new job."

"You don't have to make your report until tomorrow, do you?" said Duvelskoe. "Anyway, I'm on the same job, remember? Let's make a real night of it, old fellow."

He reached to a stand and took up two metal goblets, filled with liquor. One of these he handed to his friend. The latter opened his mouth to say something in further protest, when the cup was dashed from his hand and a third person joined them.

At first glance the newcomer appeared dark, beautiful and more than a little intoxicated. At second glance, she was a particularly splendid specimen of that fast-growing class, the hybrid Martio-Terrestrials. Her figure was delicately slender, but not as emaciated as that of a true Martian. Her terrestrial blood had diluted her complexion to a pleasant tan, well set off by her clouds of midnight hair.

Her features might have been a bit too softly cut to suit Martian tastes, but to the young Terrestrials who now looked at her they seemed of classic beauty. For the rest, she was clad in a costly gown that accorded to the latest fashion on Earth and did not trouble itself to hide the various rondures of her shape.

She shook her head in mock earnestness at the tall young man. "Don't drink that stuff!" she said. "You're just from home, aren't you?"

"If you mean just from Earth, yes," he replied.

"Then let me give you a new sensation." She held out a jewelled hand, in the palm of which lay a little heap of gravis powder. "It's new to me too. We'll burn it in that brazier yonder. The perfume from it is guaranteed to make you dream that you are anything from Martian Ruler and President of the Terrestrial League to night watchman in a girl's boarding school. Let's give it a try, shall we?"

HE SHOOK his tawny head. "Thanks, just the same. This is my first night on Mars, and I've never been to an affair like this."

"Neither have I. I came into the place just fifteen minutes ago, but what I've seen of it makes me think I'm going to like it. Come on, show your sporting blood."

The dancer had finished her performance and had sunk away with the platform. The audience turning in search of new diversion, saw the argument and gathered around to watch in amusement or to add their voices to that of the girl's.

"Do as she asks you, friend," urged one. "She seems to like you, and we all like her. Just be one of us. Plenty of fun here for everybody and every taste."

"I don't even know her," said the tall youth, a little harassed.

"That's easily remedied," said the girl. "My name's Thiana, an ancient name in my mother's family—she was Martian. What's yours?"

But he was turning away.

"You're too good for us?" she mocked. "He's a long way from too good," cried a hurly, grizzled Terrestrial, on whom various stimulants had wrought. "As far as I'm concerned, he isn't even good enough."

"Let it stand at that," answered the young man without turning around. "I'll leave."

"I'll guarantee you will!" shouted the burly one, leaping forward. In another moment he would have struck a blow on the back of the unsuspecting head. But Duvelskoe saw his intention and, quickly interposing himself, drove a skilful right to the heavy chin. The other staggered backward into a long, slumping fall among the revellers.

For a moment there was silence. Then a gust of laughter went up and several voices urged the fallen man to get on his feet and do battle. He rose, but hesitated, cherishing his bruised jaw.

"If you knew who I was, you'd have thought a long time before you did that," he snarled. "I'm Thor Harvison, and I manufacture the Harvison space-ships. I drag a broad tail on both worlds, young man."

"I'm glad to know you, Harvison," retorted Duvelskoe in impudent good humor. "My name's Shem Duvelskoe. As to your space-ships, I've operated them, and very bad space-ships they are. It takes more of a man to fly one than to make one."

Delighted applause burst out at this, and some of the watchers cried out afresh for Harvison to attack. Duvelskoe, evidently enjoying himself hugely, shook his head when his companion motioned him toward the door.

"I'll get a rawhiding from some bigwig over this, anyway, he said. "Let me give this

man one of my own rawhidings first."

Harvison snorted at that and bared two hairy forearms. He advanced stealthily, putting up his guard. But, just as Duvelskoe moved to meet him, the door opened and a sharp voice cried out for order.

At sight of the fit-looking, middle-aged Terrestrial who entered, silence fell upon the gathering. Duvelskoe snapped out of his posture of defense and stiffened to salute. Harvison shrank back in a manner which assured all who saw that, however broad the trail he dragged, the newcomer dragged one still broader. For he was Colonel Jack Stillwell, an outstanding hero of the Interplanetary War of 2675 and now head of the Terrestrial legation at Ekadome and a power of two worlds.

"Turn that thing off!" he snapped, pointing at the joy-lamp. Somebody jumped to do it, and the dimming of its rays served to sober the crowd still more. Next his eyes fell upon the girl who had introduced herself as Thiana. He beckoned her to him with a quick jerk of his head and she came forward, all of her sncudness gone.

"You should have an old-fashioned spanking, daughter," he said. "As soon as I heard you were here I came to get you. Have you used any of that powder in your hand?"

She threw it away, shaking her head.

"So much the better. See that you never do so. You have my leave to go."

She almost ran from the room, followed by several others. Duvelskoe made bold to stammer some sort of explanation.

"I didn't really know what kind of a party it was, sir. I only thought to show my friend here some Martian night life."

"Your friend? This man?" Stillwell nodded toward the tall one.

"Yes sir. He is the officer who is to report to you tomorrow for orders on the space flight to Jupiter."

"Oh, yes," said Stillwell. He offered his hand to the young stranger, his features relaxing into a smile.

"Then you are Rolf Bromburg, descendant of the first man to make a non-stop flight around the world and the twenty-fifth to bear that illustrious name—the man who has been chosen to perform a task that will stand in history beside the accomplishment of his famous ancestor?"

CHAPTER II

Flying Orders

ROLF BROMBURG went to his conference with Stillwell next day as un- easily as his tranquil spirit would allow.



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SOME stories are forgotten almost as soon as they are printed. Others stand the test of time.

Because "The Disc-Men of Jupiter," by Manly Wade Wellman, has stood this test, it has been nominated for **SCIENTIFiction's**

Despite the official's cordial treatment the night before, he felt that he had been introduced under most unsatisfactory conditions.

However, he made no effort to excuse himself to his superior. Instead, he attempted to explain that Duvelskoe was blameless in fighting Harvison. Stillwell listened sympathetically.

"Duvelskoe is of a mixed descent, and his wild instincts get him into trouble sometimes," the older man said at length, "but I agree with you that he could have done nothing else in this case. He won't suffer for it, I promise you. But let's get to business. You know what you are to do for me?"

"Only what was said on my order sheet. I understand that I was to attempt a flight to the planet Jupiter, with Duvelskoe as my lieutenant."

"That's right, but that isn't the whole story," said Stillwell. "You know, captain, I am glad you had an opportunity to visit that party last night."

Bromburg only looked his amazement.

"I see you don't understand. Perhaps I'd better explain that every day and every hour there are scores, hundreds, even thousands of such parties in progress. You'll find a few Terrestrials there, thrill-seeking; but the majority are Martians.

"They have the old philosophy of 'Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die' as their one guide. And 'tomorrow we die' means not only this individual or that. It means their whole world!"

He pointed to a map of Mars on the wall.

"You know the story that is told there; you studied it in school. The oceans of Mars are dried up. The land is all desert, except where irrigation and intensive cultivation are

practised. And even these shall pass away before long. Water and plant life and air will vanish from Mars, and there will remain a deserted, silent globe spinning in space.

"The Martians know that. And the end of a world is a dreadful thing to contemplate. Once they wanted to establish colonies on Earth, thereby to effect an escape. You know how that idea led to the Interplanetary War twenty years ago. Of course, their hopes were dashed, and they returned to their dying planet in despair.

"What use, the Martian asks himself, is the effort to improve the individual and the race? There is so little future left to them. He therefore decided to live for present alone."

"And to forget the future," added Bromburg.

"Right. The wealth of Mars is being spent on sensations. The scientists who are given the greatest rewards are those who perfect new pleasure devices. The joy-lamp—you saw it in action last night—will be only the first step in amazing new dissipations. And so, captain, the people of Mars must be saved at once."

"I understand," said Bromburg. "My expedition is to be an effort at finding a new home for Martians."

"Exactly. The emergency is desperate. We know Venus is a world of mists and bogs. Mercury, backed by the sun, is worse off than Mars. But the moons of Jupiter are more encouraging. Ganymede, the third satellite, is nearly as large as Mars, has more air and, the telescopes show, is well off in the matters of oceans and continents. The fourth satellite is somewhat smaller but also appears habitable."

Bromburg nodded. "It's worth trying, anyhow."

"Good lad!" cried Stillwell.

He rose and took books and maps from a set of shelves.

"I don't mean to send you into this thing without telling you just what you're up against," he said, turning pages. "Here we have a table, showing the distance from Mars to Jupiter at various oppositions. The shortest is more than three hundred million miles, or nearly nine times the distance from Mars to Earth on the short passage. Of course, you're not the first man who has been sent to Jupiter. Ward Moore commanded an expedition. So did Robert McClintock. So did Jack Copeland. None of them ever came back."

"It's worth trying," repeated Bromburg doggedly.

Stillwell now spread out a set of plans.

"We'll be able to send you out with the best equipment ever built," he said. "If Copeland and those other poor devils could

have done it, perhaps they would have come through. Now, this shows you the workings of the Nonpareil, your ship for the job."

"It seems a splendid craft," said Bromburg. "How long must it be in flight?"

"The most favorable journey should begin next month," replied Stillwell. "Duvelskoe, who has been supervising a part of the building, figures eight months in space between Mars and Jupiter. The ship is fitted for twelve months' flight only, which means that you must replenish your supply of rocket fuel from natural sources at the other end. As you see, here is your equipment for doing so." He indicated a chamber at the stern of the ship.

THE two plunged into an interested discussion of the proposed attempt. Duvelskoe was sent for and hurried over to present opinions and questions. Several Martian officials, happening in, enthusiastically greeted Bromburg when introduced.

"I am a thousand times encouraged at meeting you," said one, taking the young man's hand between his in the Martian manner of greeting. "How much you resemble the original Rolf Bromburg! By inheritance you are a hero and a leader. By training you are an accomplished explorer of space. Already I visualize you as the savior of my people."

"I will do my best," said Bromburg, a bit embarrassed by such warmth.

"You must do your best, and you shall succeed!" interposed another. "You cannot, must not fail!"

At length the conference broke up. The Martians remained to chat with Stillwell, while Bromburg and Duvelskoe took their departure. As they walked down a corridor toward the outer door, a feminine voice hailed them. Turning, they saw Thiana Stillwell hastening toward them.

"May I speak to you?" she asked Bromburg. Duvelskoe nodded quickly and walked on alone. The other paused and waited for what the girl might say.

She turned upon him a pair of eyes that might quicken the coldest hearts on two worlds.

"Captain Bromburg, I want to apologize for what happened last night," she said.

"Please don't trouble; I've already forgotten it."

"I want to be sure that it remains forgotten," she went on. "I acted like a fool and did my best to make you act like one. I didn't know at the time that you were the Captain Bromburg for whom my father had been waiting."

At these words a slight frown creased the young man's brow. "I wish you hadn't said that last," he told her.

"Why?" she asked quickly.

"Because it shows that you aren't apologizing to me at all. You are apologizing to the memory of my ancestor, who lived nearly eight hundred years ago."

Her eyes snapped. "Indeed!" she said, nettled. "Captain, I feel that in apologizing at all I have done quite enough. It was my father's idea, anyway. I daresay he told you to expect it."

"You do your father wrong, Miss Stillwell. He said nothing whatever about you. And, as I remarked a moment ago, I had forgotten about it. But, if you must speak to me, why refer me back to my ancient forefathers?"

"I'm arguing, not for myself, but for the original Rolf Bromburg. He did what, in his day, was considered a tremendous deed. He flew around a world in Nineteen-thirty-seven, and landed to find himself a hero. He was bewildered by the applause he received, but turned his popularity to the end nearest his heart—the advancement of aviation projects. He hated sham and ostentation. That is why I don't want to profit in any way whatsoever by the fact that I bear his name. If I allowed it, his spirit would despise me, and I should hate myself."

Thiana Stillwell laughed shortly.

"I love brave speeches, captain. That one should be put in a television play. So you aren't going to profit by his name, eh? What beside his name got you the chance to conduct this expedition of yours? And what can your interest be except to do something that you think will give the Bromburg name fresh lustre? That long-ago flight around the earth seems rather feeble to you now, doesn't it? Perhaps you'll accomplish your objective, too. I wonder what your descendant eight hundred years from now will be doing to surpass your heroics?"

"I'm growing more sorry every moment that you tried to apologize," said Bromburg.

"Sorry, nothing! You glory in it! Go on with your gallant adventure, you brave man! Two worlds will cheer you on your way, but I won't! I will be sure that I never see you again! I hope that you—"

She paused suddenly, her mouth half open, her eyes suddenly frightened at what she was saying.

"You were going to say," suggested Bromburg after a moment, "that you hoped I would never return? Perhaps you feel that I deserve not to; but how about poor Lieutenant Duvelskoe, who has done you no wrong?"

She gasped in rage, stamped her foot, and, turning, hurried away.

Bromburg followed her with his eyes. A half-smile played about his lips. Then he, too, turned and followed Duvelskoe.

THIANA STILLWELL was as good as her word. She was careful to keep out of Bromburg's way during the frequent visits he made to her father's home for the purpose of perfecting plans for the expedition. For the rest, neither of the two mentioned the affair, and nobody remarked anything out of the way.

Bromburg found the newly-built Nonpareil a thing of unceasing wonder and delight to his adventurous soul. It was an egg-shaped craft, stoutly but gracefully made, pierced all around with wide ports. Inside, the upper and lower portions were separated by a deck of transparent glass. Only a small part of the space was available for living quarters, the rest being filled by the machinery and supplies needed for the long voyage.

In the deck was located the electrical mechanism that established the ship's center of gravity, so that a man might walk upright in the top compartments, while another, in the section beneath, would appear with feet opposed, like a fly clinging upside down to the bottom of an overturned glass. This device was necessary in order to give the ship an axis on which it might spin as it travelled through emptiness.

The Nonpareil was well equipped with television apparatus and instruments for the most complex astronomical observations, but the radio fixtures were limited. The explorers, venturing to a distance ten times greater than the greatest space flight attempted to date, would be beyond the reach of the most powerful sending set on either Earth or Mars.

The fuel for the rocket engines that propelled the craft was a new and ultra-powerful development of liquid oxygen and liquid hydrogen, carefully blended. There was also equipment for manufacturing new fuel when the supply ran low. All other appointments were of the most modern and most practicable sort.

Bromburg and Duvelskoe made several test flights and were highly pleased with the performance of their vehicle. Stillwell, older and more sober-minded though he was, became infected with their enthusiasm.

"At least we are giving you the finest space-ship in history for the flight," he told them, "and, what is more, two of the finest young space-wranglers in history are going to fly it!"

Duvelskoe grinned in pleasure at this compliment from a man so highly placed, while Bromburg, flushing a little in confusion, turned to examine the nearest instrument board.

After the test flights, the Nonpareil was brought to a sheltered dock, there to be given a final and thorough checking over. The

day of the start approached. Duvelskoe bough off his growing nervousness with a series of mild dissipation. Bromburg seemed no more perturbed than a man of stone.

At last, on a clear midnight, the Nonpareil stood upon the metal runway of a rocket port, high on a rooftop of Ekadome. A score of searchlights converged upon it from other rooftops, which were crowded with favored spectators. The microphoto machines of a host of television stations were also trained upon the scene. Through them the populations of two worlds were watching.

But a strong guard of Martian police agents kept the runway clear, save for the two young fliers and half a dozen others—officials, scientists and Jack Stillwell.

"Goodbye and good luck," said the latter, wringing the hands of his two youthful friends. "In a year and a half I'll be looking for you again."

"Keep dinner hot for us," smiled Duvelskoe.

"My daughter spoke of coming to see you," went on Stillwell.

"Is that so?" said Bromburg, looking up with sudden interest.

"Yes, but I couldn't find her at home when I came. I left word with the guards to let her come up. She would be greatly thrilled to tell you goodby personally."

"It would be well not to delay the flight much longer," volunteered a Martian astronomical expert, gazing upward. "Just now the ship will find it easiest to make a good journey through the atmospheric envelope. An hour later, and it will be much harder to start auspiciously."

"That's right," said Duvelskoe. "We'd better go, eh Chief?" He saluted his comrade in friendly mockery.

"Yes, we'd better," agreed Bromburg. He shook hands with Stillwell again. "Goodbye, sir. Convey our respects to your daughter and tell her that we had to leave on the minute, and so could not wait for her."

He entered the lock at the side of the Nonpareil. Duvelskoe followed, shutting the panel behind him. The others fell quickly away from the runway. A purring sound arose and the craft began to tremble as the rocket engines started their spinning. A sudden burst of flame, and the big metal egg slid forward—upward—away. A mighty cheer, from thousands of human throats, rose to make the buildings vibrate and speed the expedition on its way.

IN THE control room of the Nonpareil, Duvelskoe kept a close watch through the forward ports, while Bromburg, his eye on the space-charts, was striking out a series of combinations on the control keyboard.

"Nose up a trifle, Wolf," called Duvelskoe.

"Now straight ahead, keeping low speed until we clear the atmosphere." He glanced to his left. "Way over there I see Jupiter. Eight months from now he'll be meeting us, up there in the sky."

Beneath them the lights of Ekadome were steadily dwindling. Phobos, one of Mars' two tiny moons, loomed on their starboard quarter like a Chinese lantern hung in the heavens.

"How's the air gauge by now?" queried Bromburg.

"It shows thin, but hold her speed steady," answered Duvelskoe. "Think of all the good ships and wranglers that have been cooked, just on account of picking up too much friction on nice, fresh air. However, am I telling you? You're the superior officer."

"So say the flying orders," said Bromburg. "Maybe I ought to make you say 'Captain, sir,' when you talk to me."

"Try and do it!" laughed Duvelskoe. "Then, if I don't, slam me in irons and put me under confinement, while you stand my watches and yours, too!" He looked at the air gauge. "We're clearing the atmospheric envelope now. I'll give you the word, and you give her the guns."

He held up a hand, then brought it quickly down. "All clear!" he shouted. Bromburg's hands, as quick and skillful as a pianist's, struck a new pattern on the keyboard. The Nonpareil quivered throughout its whole construction as the rear rocket tubes all went into action at once. Duvelskoe stepped quickly to a table and drew the indicator of the automatic steering gear down to touch a carefully marked point on a map of the solar system.

"All set," he said, relaxing. "Now, if we were lazy enough, or trustful enough, we could go into the feathers and sleep for the next eight months, waking up in time to see Jupiter peeping in through the window of our bedroom."

"Suppose we did that and a meteor came along and shot this ship right out from under us?" suggested Bromburg.

"Why then I'd flap my arms up and down and yell 'I'm a bird, I'm a bird,' and you could say, 'I told you so,' to me."

"That privilege would be something, at least," said the young captain, ruffling his tawny hair. "Well, if you're really so tired, go take a nap and I'll stand first watch."

Duvelskoe shook his head violently. "I'll do all my sleeping when I'm supposed to be lookout!" he said. "Just now I'm going to go aft and see how Mars looks falling off our tail. Come along?"

"No thanks. I'll stay here and see that we hold our course."

"Right," said Duvelskoe. "You want to look ahead, I want to look back. Maybe that's

why you're the captain and I'm the lieutenant. At least I can't think of any other reasons."

He went back along the narrow corridor toward the little observatory in the stern. Bromburg remained in his seat by the keyboard. He was thinking, not of the expedition, but of Jack Stillwell's beautiful daughter.

And so she had meant to bid him goodby, after all—or had she? Perhaps she had sent the message only to taunt him. Or, planning to come, had changed her mind at the last moment and stayed away.

Or maybe she had indeed tried to reach him, but had been delayed in the close-packed crowds and had arrived at the runway only to see his ship take flight. Had he waited a few moments, she might have taken his hand and spoken kindly. She might have forgiven him for making her angry and have asked forgiveness for her own harsh words.

Whatever she had meant or done, he would have liked one more sight of her lovely dark face.

But these thoughts were banished as a sound of commotion rose in the corridor, growing louder and louder. He rose and turned, to see two figures emerge. Laughing, and wagging his curly head, Duvelskoe was dragging someone by the wrist.

"Stowaway, captain! Make her scrub the dock and clean cuspidors!" he cried out and pushed his captive into the light.

It was Thiana Stillwell.

CHAPTER III

Bromburg Commands

WITHOUT rising from his seat, Bromburg stared at the two. Thiana drew herself up, patted down her clouds of jetty hair, and stared back with all the scornful defiance she could command.

"Enter the third conspirator!" she said. Her tone was bantering, but she did not smile.

Bromburg did not move or speak. He only waited, as if for further speech from her. Thiana's face betrayed a bit of confusion, as if she had been caught stealing cookies.

"I told you that you wouldn't see me before you left," she went on, with a great show of ease. "Well, I kept my word—I always do. But I have been a little perplexed. I thought that you might believe I was afraid of you. That is why I slipped in, to ride with you a part of the way."

"Part of the way?" echoed Duvelskoe.

"How do you expect to get back from here?"

"You'll take me, of course," replied Thiana coolly. "You wouldn't make me walk back, would you?"

At this Bromburg rose. His gesture was that of one who suddenly remembers his manners with a lady in the room, but on his feet he towered impressively and seemed anything but apologetic. Thiana wished that he had remained seated and so allowed her to keep the feeling that she commanded the situation. That feeling was growing fainter and fainter.

"Am I to understand," said the captain, "that you stowed away in the belief that you would be taken back to Mars?"

"I did believe it," she said, "and I shall be taken back."

"So you shall," he made reply. "So you shall, when we have completed our mission to the moons of Jupiter."

Thiana stiffened and paled at that, and Duvelskoe's grin grew fainter.

"What?" the girl almost shouted.

"We are on our way to a hitherto unexplored part of the solar system," said Bromburg. "We cannot turn back. You are here, and you are going along."

The tone of his voice showed that he was as resolute as rock. The fight went out of Thiana in an instant. Her voice shook as she spoke again.

"But—but do you mean it?"

"Mean it? Of course I mean it."

"Captain Bromburg!" she pleaded. "What a dreadful revenge to take on me!"

"It's not revenge at all. It's necessity."

"Necessity? To take me into unknown dangers, unforeseen hardships? Really—"

"When you spoke last you were prone to minimize the dangers and the hardships, and to think more of the applause, weren't you? Remember, you said that I was after glory. Well, now you have your chance to share in it."

"But why? Surely it would be only a short run back."

He picked up a handful of papers and spread them out. "See here, Miss Stillwell. Here are the most delicate and careful calculations I ever saw. They represent the work of a corps of the finest astronomers and scientists on Mars, and on them we are basing our speed, our route, the conduct of our entire expedition.

"To turn back now would necessitate a complete revision. It would take weeks, and in the meantime the favorable opposition of Mars and Jupiter would be past. I am sorry, Miss Stillwell, truly sorry. But I can't turn back for your sake or for the sake of any other person."

He turned away as if that settled it. Dropping into his seat, he gave his attention again

to the space-charts and control-board. The girl almost ran to him.

"But I'm not prepared! I brought along no equipment."

"We'll fit you out from among our things."

"This amounts to kidnapping!"

"That's right," put in Duvelskoe. "Give it a think, Rolf. Her father is the one who's sending us out. He certainly didn't authorize us to take his daughter along."

"With all due respect to Stillwell, my orders come straight from much higher authorities," said Bromburg quietly.

"Lord!" Duvelskoe persisted. "Think what a jam we may get into over this."

"I've considered it, and I think I am doing my duty to the best of my ability."

"Your duty!" blazed Duvelskoe. "Is it your duty to take out your spite on me as well as on her? Listen, now—"

"That will do!" Bromburg sprang to his feet. With one commanding gesture he silenced his associate. "I'm captain here, and I'm the only law on board the Nonpareil. We were joking about it a moment ago, but it's no joke now. If your questioning of my authority is serious, the sooner we settle it the better. Do you want to fight me?"

He clenched two brown, sinewy fists.

"No, I don't," said Duvelskoe quickly.

"Then stop trying to take this matter out of my hands!"

Duvelskoe turned and walked away down the corridor. Thiana followed him.

"Aren't you going to help me?" she queried anxiously.

Duvelskoe turned his gypsy face toward her. The grin had returned to it.

"I'm afraid not. You heard what Rolf said, and you heard what I said. Captain Rolf Bromburg commands the good ship Nonpareil."

One of the two tiny sleeping compartments was turned over to Thiana, while the men agreed to share the other. She was given a pair of Duvelskoe's breeches, some puttees, a sweater and a leather coat. She uttered casual words of thanks, as though they were making her comfortable on a picnic. Then she closed the door of her compartment behind her and remained unseen and silent.

HOURS passed. Duvelskoe was sleeping and Bromburg, forward with the machinery, was jotting down the first day's record in the brand new log book.

"Ship's run for past twenty-four hours, one hundred thirty-four thousand and nine miles," he began. Under that he noted the standings of various meters showing consumption of rocket fuel, gravitational pull of the sun and the nearest planets, and other significant data.

"The first day's performance of the Non-

pareil, throughout all appointments, left nothing to be desired," he went on. "It's mechanism cleared the Martian atmospheric envelope handily. Lieutenant Duvelskoe, setting the automatic steering devices, pronounced them efficient to a hair."

His brow creased slightly as he set down the next paragraph.

"Less than an hour after clearing from atmosphere, a stowaway was discovered on board. Name, Miss Thiana Stillwell, daughter of the trustee and chief advisor of the expedition. She asked to be returned to Mars immediately. Her request was refused, and the expedition continued on its mission."

He closed the log-book and put it away. Then, from a small shelf, he drew another volume, bound in red. Settling back in a position from which he could command the forward ports, the television screens and all control mechanism, he began to read.

As he turned the pages, he sensed a presence behind him. Looking around, he saw Thiana Stillwell, dressed in the ill-fitting clothes lent her and very attractive in spite of them.

"You are reading?" she said.

"As you see," he replied, rising and offering her his seat.

"I haven't read in ages," she told him, accepting it. "However, there won't be much else to do, will there?"

"Not in the way of recreation, I'm afraid. We have no television drama, no motion pictures, no radio music. Duvelskoe brought a guitar, I think, but that's all—that, and a deck of cards and a few books like this one."

"What is it?"

"It's called 'Lorna Doone.' You may look at it if you wish."

She thumbed through it. "It's a love story, isn't it?"

"Of a sort. It has exciting moments, too. Raids, fighting, and mystery. Along toward the last of the book, one man rips out another's biceps with his bare hands."

"Ob! It sounds like the savage ancients."

"It was written in the nineteenth century. That's eight hundred years ago."

"I suppose they really acted that way then. I wonder what for, sometimes."

"In this case, for Lorna Doone."

"Was Lorna Doone the girl in the book?" she asked. "She must have been a dreadful person to inspire such things."

Bromburg laughed. "Hardly. Wait, I'll read to you about her."

He took the book and quickly found a passage. He read aloud:

"By the side of the stream she was coming to me, even among the primroses, as if she loved them all; and every flower looked the brighter, as if her eyes were on them. I could not see what her face was, my heart

was awake and trembled; only that her hair was flowing from a wreath of white violets, and the grace of her coming was like the appearance of the first wild-flower. The pale gleam over the western cliffs threw a shadow of light behind her, as if the sun were lingering. Never do I see that light from the closing of the west, even in these my aged days, without thinking of her. Ah me, if it comes to that, what do I see of earth or heaven without thinking of her?"

When he was through, Thiana shook her head slowly.

"How beautiful that is! No modern writer can say it as well."

"Perhaps no modern woman can inspire it," said Bromburg.

"That's hardly complimentary."

"I'm afraid it's true."

Rising, she looked at him with a softened face.

"I wonder if you'll lend me the book when you're done," she said.

DAYS lengthened into weeks. The three human beings in their cramped quarters settled into an accustomed routine of existence. Thiana read not only "Lorna Doone" but all the books in Bromburg's tiny library and then searched eagerly for other occupation.

Duvelskoe lightened the tedium of the long quiet hours. He taught her to step off violent, posturing dances which, he said, were favorites of his gypsy ancestors, then accompanied her on the guitar. He wrestled with Bromburg, accepting with rueful good nature an almost unbroken series of defeats. The three also played chess and cards and found much to interest them in the spectacle of the heavens around them.

In the spangled reaches of the stars Mars had dwindled to a small red spot, far astern. Jupiter grew larger afar to one side as he hastened along the track which would bring him to his far-off rendezvous with the Nonpareil. The ship seemed utterly alone, an independent world in itself, with which they had become more familiar than the great globe of soil and water that had given them birth.

The situation would try the most resolute patience sometimes, and more than once Thiana would find cause for quarrel with Bromburg. Among other things, she resented the fact that he turned to Duvelskoe, and not to her, for lessons in the universal language of Mars.

"I'm half Martian," she pointed out. "He's a Terrestrial like all his people before him on both sides. Why not learn from me?"

"Because Duvelskoe has lived on Mars for several years, while you, for all your descent, have been reared and educated on

Earth. I can get a purer accent from his teachings."

"A purer accent!" she said, her cheeks growing hot. "You put quite a premium on purity, don't you captain?"

"A tremendous one," he answered.

"On my soul, I think you don't want to talk to me!"

"Sometimes I do not," he told her frankly.

She exclaimed in surprised anger and flung out of his presence. For several days she avoided him as completely as the limited space inside the ship would allow.

On the other hand she worked hard to fill a place in the daily routine. She undertook to prepare the meals, to keep the living quarters clean and otherwise to free the men from such tasks in order that they might spend more time with the controls and instruments.

A month and a half in space saw them with nearly a fourth of the distance behind them. Thiana noticed that her companions spent longer hours at the machinery and kept a sharper lookout. She wondered at this, but asked no questions.

At last one day, as she stood musing beside a port, she was attracted by a light in outer space. Looking up in surprise, she beheld a great luminous disc, three times the size of the moon as seen from Earth and, like the moon, mottled and flecked. As she watched, it grew larger and larger. She cried out in delight at its beauty and gazed raptly as the speeding ship flashed across in front of the wonder. The shining body dropped astern.

"What was it?" she cried, running forward to where Duvelskoe and Bromburg were at work together. "I was so sorry to leave it behind."

"If we hadn't left it behind, it would have smashed us to atoms," said Bromburg. "That was an asteroid—one of the many little planets that are found in this part of space. We'll see more of them. I, for one, wish that we would see less."

"It was an asteroid that washed out Jack Copeland when he tried to make a flight to Jupiter," Duvelskoe told her. "Copeland wasn't much of a space wrangler, but he had nerve, and evidently he was all sorts of a good fellow. Imagine his feelings when that little world suddenly loomed up to knock him off!"

"If it's so dangerous, why couldn't we fly over the asteroid belt?" asked Thiana.

"That would be hard to do, especially since we want to hold to our course as laid," Bromburg explained. "But it isn't so dangerous, after all. We're equipped with radio devices that warn us of approaching bodies. That is something that Copeland and the others never heard of. We'll slip through

them, just like a football player who changes pace in order to avoid tacklers when they rush him."

"Football player, you say? Did you play football?"

"A little, in school."

"A little!" cried Duvelskoe, grimacing. "Heavens, young lady, did you never follow sports on Earth? Six years ago Rolf here was the master mind and the master physique that made Oklahoma University's eleven a bunch of all-Internationals! His modesty and your ignorance are giving me a brand new thrill."

"Six years ago was a little before my time as a football fan," she apologized.

"Then you're forgiven," said Duvelskoe.

BROMBURG was not listening. He was intently watching a bowl-like instrument, connected by wires to a dial-covered cabinet and about two thirds full of a gleaming white liquid, like mercury or molten silver. Even as he gazed, the surface of the liquid became agitated and emitted blue sparks.

"Another asteroid already?" He glanced at the dials. "It's a long way off, however. Spot it on the television, will you, Duvelskoe?"

The Lieutenant did so. "We're out of danger from it if we keep this speed, Rolf," he said. "It's not within hours of us, and there are no others in sight."

He found time to lecture Thiana on the nature and origin of the asteroids. He told how, in all probability, a great planet had once skimmed around the sun in these latitudes of space, only to break into bits through some gigantic catastrophe. The asteroid belt was many millions of miles across, but they hoped to encounter very few of the spinning particles at this time.

Days followed, with the ship now slowing, now speeding to get out of the orbits of approaching asteroids. It passed close behind Ceres, the largest of the group, and all looked in wonder at the miniature world, 500 miles in diameter, with its miniature mountains, valleys and craters.

"Do you suppose anyone ever lived there?" inquired Thiana.

"I'm afraid not," answered Duvelskoe. "Ceres is far too small to have ever had air or water. People living on her would have to build artificial cities, with synthetic atmosphere held under domed roofs, like the colonies on the moons of Earth and Mars."

"The force of gravity would be very low on that little planet yonder," said Bromburg, who had been busy taking photographs. "You could throw a thousand pound weight around like a pebble. You could jump nearly a mile straight up if you had any athletic prowess at all. And the three of us could

life this space-ship above our heads with our unaided muscular strength."

"That would be very exciting," said Thiana. "Will we find the same conditions on Jupiter?"

"Oh, no. Gravity there is nearly two and a quarter times what it is on Earth. You weigh about one hundred twenty pounds on earth—that would make you close onto two hundred seventy on Jupiter."

"Heavens!" cried Thiana. "Then let's stay here on Ceres!"

Another month elapsed. Bromburg and Duvelskoe did not relax their vigilance. They passed dozens of asteroids at close quarters, but never close enough to feel gravely threatened. Rapidly they approached the point where they knew the danger of a mid-space collision would be over.

But one day Thiana came to the control-room to find the two men working hard at a system of levers. Their faces were set in expressions of utmost seriousness.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Fuel mixture went bad on us," replied Bromburg shortly. "We have to change the whole works, right here and now."

"And right on the edge of the asteroid belt," groaned Duvelskoe, bending over his task. "Thank heaven, we have a few good rocket tubes going. They hold us on our course, but what if we want to change it suddenly?"

"Anything I can do?" offered Thiana.

"Nothing except stay out of our way," mumbled Bromburg.

Once more she felt her temper rise, but as she turned to walk away she saw something that drove all feeling of personal injury from her mind. In the bowl-like instrument that gave warning of approaching asteroids the mercury-seeming liquid was stirring and sparks rose and fell.

"Look!" she cried, pointing. Both men lifted their heads and saw.

"Of all the breaks!" exclaimed Duvelskoe, running to check the television. "Good heavens, they're right on top of us!"

"They?" echoed Bromburg, and he and Thiana also looked.

There, nearly filling the whole of the reflecting screen, were two burling images—great, shining irregular bodies, spinning and rotating at great speed, each circling the other. Even as the three looked, the images grew larger.

"We're lost!" cried Thiana, rushing to a port. Sure enough, the two asteroids loomed upon and over them like dancing mountains. Compared to their vast circles, the Nonpareil suddenly seemed to dwindle in size until it was like a grain of barley between these mighty millstones of space.

"Lost? I guess you're right," said Duvel-

skoe in a strangely calm voice. "They're only a few miles away. Might as well be a few feet."

"Not lost yet!" flashed back Bromburg, springing from the levers to the keyboard. "We have a chance!"

"A Chinaman's chance," snorted Duvelskoe, but he looked hopefully at the tall captain.

His eyes on the television, Bromburg began to pick at the keyboard as rapidly as though it were a typewriter. He struck combination after combination, slowing or speeding the ship each moment.

"Are they here yet?" he queried.

"Here—yes!" shouted Duvelskoe. "It's curtains!"

Bromburg's spread hands fell on the keys once more. The ship seemed to quiver like a taut harp string.

In front of the how whirled one asteroid, behind the stern whirled another. For a moment they seemed almost to scrape the two ends of the hull. Then they fell away, began to recede. They shrank in apparent size before the fixed gaze of the watchers.

By moving between the two, the Nonpareil had saved itself!

Again Bromburg clicked on the combination for full speed ahead and rose from his seat. Even as he looked toward his companions, Thiana slumped to the glass deck and lay still.

He quickly knelt and raised her head.

"Bring water, Duvelskoe," he called. Then louder, "Duvelskoe!"

But the lieutenant still stood at the port, as motionless as though carved out of wood, watching the death that had slid past by such a narrow margin. And Bromburg called again before Duvelskoe showed that he had heard or seen what was happening in the room beside him.

CHAPTER IV

Ganymede

SLOWLY, as if wearied by eight unbroken months in space, the Nonpareil settled down upon a gently rolling plain, while three faces appeared at the ports to look out at the strange landscape.

Around them lay stretches of mossy turf that gleamed, now violet, now green, like changeable silk. Here and there it was tufted with clumps of strange bushes. In the middle distance a silvery stream wound its way, and farther on were wooded hills. In the blue sky above drifted fleecy clouds, and two lights gleamed—the great banded globe

of Jupiter and the smaller but much more brilliant sun. The expedition had reached Ganymede, third moon of the Jovian group. "Delightful!" exclaimed Thiana. "Let's get out into the open."

"Wait," said Bromburg.

"Wait?" she said sharply, for her nerves had been on edge for many monotonous weeks. "Are you so in love with this cramped little nutshell? Well, I'm not! I'm sick of it!"

"I'm as anxious to get out as you are," went on Bromburg, "but first we want to know if it's safe on Ganymede. Why, the very air may choke you."

Duvelskoe was bending over some testing apparatus. At the last remark of the captain, he looked up and shook his head.

"Fortunately not, Rolf. As I analyze the atmosphere, it contains oxygen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide and water vapors, just like that of Mars or Earth. It's perfectly safe."

"Good!" said Bromburg. "And the pressure?"

"Nearly thirteen pounds to the square inch."

"Good!" said Bromburg again. "That makes breathing possible. Now, Thiana, we may leave."

One by one they passed through a lock panel and, for the first time in ages, it seemed, felt turf and soil under their feet. Bromburg stooped and took a pinch of earth.

"It seems rich enough," he reported. "Let's take some samples back, Duvelskoe; also some of this Ganymede grass." He picked some of the fine blades, bruised them between his hands, smelled them, cautiously tasted them.

"Going in for farming, Rolf?" joked Duvelskoe.

"Not I, but the colonists who come here will. At first glance, it bests any agricultural potentialities that Mars may offer."

Thiana was still pouting, and her temper was not improved when she saw that the men did not notice her looks of disfavor. They were busily engaged in making gravity tests, in peering at the clouds through spectroscopes, and in computing the light and heat supply emanating from Jupiter and the sun. Also they found more and more specimens and carried them to the ship. At last her ill-humor wore away and her heart lightened as Bromburg suggested a short stroll to the banks of the stream.

The trio set out, finding and discussing new wonders at every step. From the bushes they gathered fleshy leaves and particolored flowers of great size. The stir of small life was all about them. Once a rose-colored creature, the size of a squirrel and walking upon many legs, scuttled away from under their very feet and darted into a hole.

They approached a bush-clump to see a

larger thing peering interestedly at them from the branches to which it clung, but it withdrew to some hiding place before they could get a good glimpse of it. Overhead they saw floating specks that might be large birds. Nowhere, however, did they see cultivation or other sign of human works.

"No natives, hostile or otherwise," observed Duvelskoe.

"Right, so far as I can see," agreed Bromburg. "That's just as well, for the colonists will find the going much easier."

"They'll be glad to find no home talent to stage demonstrations against undesirable foreigners," contributed Thiana.

They reached the water at last. Duvelskoe made simple chemical tests and pronounced it pure and drinkable.

"This is really a wonderful real estate bargain," he exulted. "What could be a better spot for the first colony than this little subdivision? Good water, rich soil, no nasty neighbors! I'm tempted to settle down here myself."

"Not while I'm captain, you won't," smiled Bromburg. "I'll need you to help me wrangle the Nonpareil back to Mars."

They returned to the ship, and the next several days were spent in making brief hops here and there about the little world. Once they paused on the shore of an ocean and gathered strange shellfish for their collection of specimens. Another time they perched high on a mountain top while Bromburg and Duvelskoe poked into what looked like metal deposits. At last they returned to the very spot where they first landed.

Night had fallen and they made a bonfire. Duvelskoe played his guitar and sang, and Thiana danced the gypsy steps she had learned from him. Their canned and concentrated provisions were augmented by fresh fruits and berries which analysis had proved edible. They felt more like picnickers on a holiday than explorers on a strange, unknown globe.

AT THE end of dinner, Bromburg checked over a series of sheets and brought the log up to date by firelight.

"Did you go over the ship today, as I told you?" he asked Duvelskoe.

"I did."

"Very well. We will leave Ganymede in the morning."

"Homeward bound!" cried Thiana.

"Not yet. We're going to circumnavigate Jupiter first, which will take, as I figure it, about twenty-eight days. We'll make a leisurely survey, finishing the job just at the right time to start back."

"Twenty-eight days!" she ejaculated. "Nearly a month! Do you mean that you're going to exile us from home still longer?"

"Please, Thiana, I wish you wouldn't put it like that. This is a scientific expedition."

"Faugh! What do I care for cold science? I'm interested in my own welfare just now."

"That's very unfortunate." Bromburg's voice had grown chilly. "You invited yourself to go along with us, you know, and you can't complain because the policy of this expedition is not concerned primarily with the welfare of those who make it up."

"Duvelskoe and I were provided with the best ship, the best instruments and equipment, ever seen; but that was to make our return as sure as possible. We're no more than scientific instruments ourselves. And I will say again that I am in command. The ship and those upon it will operate under my orders."

Thiana rose without replying and entered the Nonpareil, where it stood nearby.

Duvelskoe looked closely at Bromburg and thought that he detected an expression of unhappiness. But perhaps it was the flickering of the firelight on the thoughtful face, for the young captain neither spoke nor stirred, nor so much as looked after Thiana. Duvelskoe tossed the stump of his cigarette into the coals and broke the silence.

"We'd better be getting inside. Rolf."

"Right," said the other, and, rising, scratched dirt over the dying flames. Then he led the way to the lock panel.

They entered and carefully shut themselves in. At that moment there was a vibration in the floor under their feet. Even as they paused in wonder, the Nonpareil rose swiftly from its resting place and soared heavenward.

Bromburg and Duvelskoe exchanged astounded glances. Then they ran along the narrow middle passageway toward the control rooms forward. A glass door brought them to a halt and refused to open when they tried it. They stood helplessly, looking into the compartment beyond, where Thiana labored unskillfully but to some purpose at the keyboard.

Bromburg rapped loudly on the glass. Turning, Thiana made a mocking gesture.

"Let us in!" cried the captain. "Let us in, I say! You'll kill us all!"

"Not on your life! I'm having the first good time I've had since I left Mars!" the girl called back, her voice made audible by the radio attachments with which every part of the ship was fitted. "And I won't kill you all; I'm flying splendidly."

"I told you to evacuate the fuel supply last night," Bromburg said to Duvelskoe.

"You did it, I suppose?"

"I did," replied the other.

"Do you hear that?" said Bromburg, addressing Thiana again. "We discharged all the rocket fuel from the tanks, making ready

to generate new from the air and water supply on Ganymede. You're travelling now on the last few puffs that were left. For heaven's sake, bring her down before she crashes!"

"That's a likely story," she answered, "and it might scare me if you had been more convincing. Just now it sounds like a good argument, made up on the spur of the moment. Anyway, I'm going to fly clear away from Ganymede, and we won't crash anywhere."

"She's utterly mad!" groaned Bromburg. "What'll we do?"

"Stay here and keep her attention diverted," whispered Duvelskoe. "I'll slip down under and see if I can't come through the hatchway into the control room. Ten to one she hasn't thought to fasten it."

He turned and ran back down the passage.

IN THE stern observatory he knelt and threw back a metal cover, revealing a circular opening like a manhole. Into this he fairly hurled himself, head first. In another second he found himself scrambling onto the opposite surface of the deck, the change in gravitational pull forcing him to pull himself apparently upward and out of the hole to do so. He stood up, his position exactly the reverse of what it had been a moment ago.

Swiftly but slowly he ran forward again. Looking downward, he saw the soles of Bromburg's feet through the transparent deck. A moment later he was opposite the control room, was struggling through the hatchway into it.

But Thiana saw him and ran toward him. She struck with a wrench. Duvelskoe sank down, half in, half out of the opening. She dragged him through, fastened the cover securely, and returned to the keyboard.

"I'll never forgive you for that!" shouted Bromburg, startled out of his characteristic tranquility at last.

"I'm not asking your forgiveness, Captain Bromburg," snapped Thiana. "I have a number of your actions to forgive, too!"

Straining his eyes to look at the instruments near her, Bromburg could see that the ship had cleared the atmospheric envelope of Ganymede. He could not fight back the chill that came over him, for he had spoken the truth when he had said that only a little fuel remained. He was as close to fear as he had ever been in his life.

But he told himself that he would stand no more, looking into that room like a dog that has been kicked out. He had pleaded, he had reasoned, with this madwoman. He turned on his heel and walked back to the stern ports, where he looked moodily out at the diminishing ball that was Ganymede.

For minutes, perhaps for half an hour, he stood thus. He made no sound or motion. Suddenly the ship seemed to shake itself. He staggered to keep his balance, while before his eyes Ganymede seemed to spin away toward the side of the port and out of his vision.

The fuel was gone! The Nonpareil was falling back toward the satellite it had just left!

Quickly he raced forward again. The door into the control room was flung open before him and Thiana met him, her face drawn into a terrorized mask.

"What have I done?" she quavered. Without answering, he dropped into the seat of the keyboard and touched the top row of keys.

He felt a little start of relief when he found that in one tank remained some of the low-grade fuel used for traveling at reduced speeds within atmospheric limits. It offered a slim chance, but still a chance. He began striking combinations.

"Can you save us?" breathed Thiana.

"Perhaps," he said shortly. His eyes went first to the dull glow that Ganymede made on one flank, then to the larger mass of Jupiter on the other. His lips tightened and his eyes reflected a sudden glint of determination. He swung the nose of the Nonpareil away from Ganymede again, laying it point-blank toward the huge planet.

"Then you think—" began Thiana.

"Please don't bother me," he interrupted. She turned from him, but without the feeling of defiance that had always arisen within her at his other fancied rebuffs. She was weeping now. Her eyes fell upon Duvelskoe, still unconscious, and she hurried to him, attempting to lift him.

Now she realized that she had been crazy for a little while, had truly been a candidate for an asylum. Maddened by Bromburg's assumption of command and responsibility through all the endless days, the eternal months, she had made a ridiculous move. At last she was sane again, but the return of sanity did not banish the danger into which her folly had put her and the two men.

She stole a glance at Bromburg, who was carefully striking at the single row of keys to which the ship responded. He was as cool, as skilful, as ever. If mortal man could save them, Bromburg could. She knew that.

She washed Duvelskoe's face with a damp cloth. He stirred under her ministrations, opened his eyes, then rose quickly to his feet. Seeing Bromburg at the keyboard, he grinned his relief.

"All right, is she?" he asked.

"All right, as far as we have gone," said

Bromburg. "Look at the gravity gauges, will you?"

Duvelskoe obeyed. "Ganymede attracts us about sixty-nine hundredths, Jupiter about thirty hundredths and a little over. Other bodies, less than one percent."

"Continue to read me the figures, regarding Jupiter alone, every half minute," said Bromburg.

"What are you doing?" ventured Thiana. "Are you beading for Jupiter? Why that will be as bad as falling back to Ganymede!"

"Not quite," said Duvelskoe. "Ganymede is made up of hard rocks and soil. The Nonpareil would be splattered like a ripe melon. But Jupiter is gaseous—at least there is a layer of gas thousands of miles thick on the outside of the planet. That is what gives us a chance. Jupiter's pull, now about thirty hundredths and a half!"

STILL the Nonpareil moved forward at a pace that seemed little better than creeping, while slowly, by tiny divisions of a percent, Jupiter's attraction grew. At last the figure approached the fifty hundredth mark.

"Tell me when it reaches fifty hundredth," said Bromburg, bending to turn half a dozen spigot-like instruments on a low stand beside the keyboard.

"Fifty, even!" sang out Duvelskoe a few moments later. Immediately Bromburg struck half a dozen keys at once, held them for a second, then rose from his seat.

"I've done what I could," he said. "Let us hope that it's enough."

"What did you do?" asked Duvelskoe.

"Poured all the fuel into the rear tube-feeders. When we came to the fifty hundredth mark, I fired it all, every bit. It wasn't much—hardly more than a double shot—but it should give us the momentum we need to bring us right to Jupiter. If I had done otherwise, we might have begun to revolve around the planet as one more tiny satellite."

"Why not that way as well as another?" suggested Thiana.

"Because I'm hoping to find elements in Jupiter's atmosphere from which we can replenish our fuel supply. Doesn't that possibility interest you?"

Overwrought, Thiana began to weep again, but dried her tears when Duvelskoe showed her the wonder of Jupiter's steadily growing globe.

Far closer than any human eye ever had before, they observed the huge disc with its cloudy stripes. Around its equator was a broad belt, a gleaming ivory white in color and bounded above and below by narrower belts of rusty red. Other stripes, growing narrower as they neared the poles, showed deep yellow, tan, reddish, brownish and purple shades. The poles themselves seemed to

be of a shadowy gray. Close examination of the surface showed that it slowly seethed.

For an hour they watched the planet's apparent size increase with growing rapidity. They were falling faster and faster toward it. Ganymede, in the rear, was only a moon-like circle. Jupiter grew to fill the entire range of their forward vision, a vast, parti-colored cloud.

"It won't be long now," said Duvelskoe. Even as he spoke, the formless surface rushed toward them, enveloped them. The Nonpareil had plunged into Jupiter's mass.

On, on they went, with misty wreaths swishing past the ports. So swift was their pace that friction with the gases outside generated an uncomfortable heat. Had their ship been less cunningly made, and of less durable material, it might have caught fire. But it retained its shape and substance, while its speed grew less by degrees and at last slowed to a halt.

Examination proved that they were floating idly in the midst of butter-colored clouds, as a sunken wreck floats in the middle depths of a sea. From below came a steady stream of light, struggling to pierce the vapors, but what its source might be they could not see. No motion could be observed save in the ship itself.

CHAPTER V

Disc-Men

THE three occupants of the Nonpareil were affected in widely different ways by the aspect of their new surroundings. Thiana could only stand and stare in amazement. Bromburg was at the television, trying to get a clearer view of the source of the light from below. Duvelskoe looked up from his work with an exclamation of joy.

"This stuff has what it takes to run us back home," he cried. "I've found both oxygen and hydrogen."

"Is it anything that we can breathe?" asked Bromburg. "I'd like to get out into it, if so."

"Don't try it. In the first place the pressure is considerable and the density is greater than that of the most thoroughly water-saturated air. Then there is a whole chemistry shop full of other elements in with the oxygen and hydrogen, even including some metallic vapors. You'd need a space suit to make any kind of a successful trip outdoors."

"The buoyancy apparatus of the ship is holding us at this level," said Bromburg. "I wish we could drop lower. I'd like to know

more about whatever it is that is sending up the light. I suppose that there is an incandescent liquid core in the center of the planet, just as the theorists say, but I want to be sure."

"Heavens, man, leave something for the next expedition to find out!" laughed Duvelskoe. "In the meantime, let's set our mixing machinery to work."

The two men began operating the machinery in the fuel hold and soon found that it successfully separated and prepared the oxygen and hydrogen needed to feed their rocket blasts. Inside of thirteen hours, they estimated, they would be equipped for the journey back. Leaving the mechanism in motion, they returned to Thiana, who was standing with her face close to the largest port. As they approached, she beckoned to them with excited gestures.

"Come quickly!" she cried. "Here's something absolutely unbelievable!"

They hurried to her side and looked out.

Through the smoky yellow veil they made out a strange moving thing that, as they peered, revealed itself as a dark disc, its edge inclined toward them, slowly turning. It was as large around as a tea-tray, and was thickest in the middle, so that its shape was like that of two saucers, placed with concave faces together. Its spinning motion increased and it drew nearer. They could see now that it was composed of living tissue.

Closer it came, and closer. It spun out of sight to the left, coming up against the ship, and a moment later came into view again, but a few inches from the port. There it hovered, almost within arm's length of them, while they stood silent, fearing that a sound or a motion might cause it to go away.

Slowly it revolved, and nowhere upon it could they see the slightest trace of a visible organ. Yet it quite patently sensed their presence, their attitude, as it hovered there. After a little time, it suddenly went spinning away again, to be swallowed by the enveloping vapors.

"It was alive, wasn't it?" murmured Thiana, gazing after the vanishing discoid.

"Indeed it was," replied Duvelskoe. "Alive and intelligent."

"I wonder what its principle of movement can be," said Bromburg. "It had absolutely no legs, wings, fins or other organs of locomotion, as we know them. Yet it travelled easily and swiftly in all directions."

"And it didn't have eyes or ears either," added Duvelskoe. "Yet it knew we were here and ran away, probably to tell mother."

"I'd like to capture it," mused the captain. "We could learn a lot from it—perhaps new methods of flight."

"I vote we leave that to another expedi-

tion, too," interrupted Duvelskoe. "That is, if there ever is another expedition. At present I'm interested chiefly in getting out of here. The climate seems so unhealthy—all foggy and misty, with the sunlight down underfoot instead of overhead."

"Suppose we eat," suggested Thiana.

"Right! It must be near breakfast time," said Bromburg. He turned away from the port, but halted at Duvelskoe's cry and looked out again.

Spinning into view came a host of disc-creatures. As far as he could see through the mists, they were swarming from all directions, and he felt sure that there were countless others out of sight in the clouds. Like a plague of grats they drew in around the Nonpareil, brushing its sides, pausing at its ports, cruising along its length.

"Say, our little friend has brought all his brothers and sisters to take a look at us!" said Duvelskoe.

The spinning creatures ranged in size from soup-plate to cartwheel, and in color from soft tan to deep purplish brown. All were in motion, whether merely bobbing up and down as if floating on a quiet stream or skinning and whirling here and there like leaves in a high wind. Yet none of them left the vicinity of the ship.

SUDDENLY a larger disc floated into view—one as large as a round table-top, and almost black in hue. It went straight from bow to stern of the Nonpareil, as if making an inspection. Then, it drew away. The smaller discs fell back, too, ranging themselves in a sort of curtain formation beyond the big one.

"They're falling away on this side, too," said Duvelskoe, running across to look out of the ports opposite. "That big fellow is a commander of some sort. I wonder what they're up to now."

He had only an instant of mystification. From the disc-commander's center suddenly shot a long, fine tendril, shooting upward and upward, extending itself like a serpentine ribbon thrown into the air at a carnival. As if it were a signal, every other disc hurled forth a similar thread, toward the ship. A thousand slender lines touched the metal hull at the same instant, then, as if alive, they glided away, under or around it. In a quarter of a minute the Nonpareil was completely encompassed by the slim cords.

Then the discs began to move to and fro and up and down, like shuttles on a complicated loom. The lines by which they held the ship became crossed and interwoven, until the whole was a sort of coarse fabric in which the craft was completely netted, like a fruit in a string bag. "Good Lord, they've captured us!" gasped Duvelskoe.

"Any fuel in the tanks?" asked Bromburg. "There must be a little by now. Shall we try to break loose?"

"Yes. No telling what they mean to do to us."

The captain crossed to the keyboard and struck a combination. The ship moved forward, then stopped. The network held.

"No use," groaned Duvelskoe. "If we hit that little gunnysack at full speed, we'd smash it to pieces like a paper hoop. But we can't get up enough power from a standstill."

He was right. Bromburg tried other combinations, but his efforts were useless. The ship was bound on every quarter.

For a moment all three human beings gazed helplessly at each other. Then Bromburg made one more attempt. He went to the port nearest the big disc-thing that seemed to be in command and pressed his hands and face close to the pane. The strange creature drew near.

First Bromburg pointed to himself, then showed his hands, open and empty, to denote peaceful intentions. He waved his arms in a gesture to include the ship, then pointed to the threadlike lines that criss-crossed the port. Then he made sweeping movements of his hands to indicate loosening of the bonds and pointed again to himself, his comrades, then upward in an effort to show that he wished to do nothing but go away.

The big disc seemed to quiver with each new sign he made.

"I think that it understands," he said softly. He finished his pantomime by holding out both hands in appeal.

The creature hovered for a moment only. Then it spun slowly away. Bromburg looked back at Duvelskoe and Thiana.

"It knew what I meant," he said. "It knew—and it refused!"

"I wish I had a ray-gun!" gritted out Duvelskoe, shaking his fist at the uncanny things outside. "How I'd wash out these animated dinner-plates! I'd show them what to hold and what to turn loose!"

"Yes, we should have been provided with space-weapons," said Bromburg. "However, we aren't. We have only the smallest of disintegrator rays, fit for a hand weapon, but no more. If there was ground outside on which we could stand, we might slip out and fight. As it is, they would probably whip their threads around us and drag us off the outside of the ship."

"What are those threads of theirs?" asked Thiana.

"As far as I can see, they are simply spun out, like the web of a spider," said Bromburg. "That's a good comparison just now, for if we aren't caught like a moth in a web, I'm no judge."

Thiana dropped her head.

"I feel dreadfully guilty," she said. "I've been such a fool. I was downright wicked, and now I'm being punished for it. But you two are being punished with me! That is the hardest to stand."

For a moment she seemed almost ready to burst into tears. Bromburg stepped quickly to her side and took her hand.

"Don't say that," he pleaded. "You guessed wrong, and here we are. But blaming you won't get us out of this pinch. Forget any troubles we may have had."

She looked up at him, and for the first time they smiled into each other's eyes. Thiana dashed away a few tears.

"I'm not going to pout over my misfortunes any more," she promised. "I'm going to puzzle out a way to get us away from here!"

They might have said more, but at that moment they felt the ship moving. Looking out, they saw the yellow mist drifting past and knew that their discoid captors were dragging the Nonpareil along by countless lines. From the bow ports they could see the unattached commander leading the way. Whatever their fate was to be, they were approaching it.

NOW for the Nonpareil was dragged by its strange captors could not be ascertained. There was no landscape outside whereby one could judge speed, and the speedometers recorded nothing. Fast or slowly, the army of disc traveled for hours, while the three prisoners inside pondered the question of escape but to no avail.

Duvelskoe reported that the fuel tanks were rapidly filling, but this would help them little while they were still in the net woven by the disc-creatures. Even had they been able to attack, they could hardly venture forth into the bottomless mist to do so. On and on their ship was dragged, always with the same weird company in attendance, the same yellow fog enveloping it, the same glowing light beneath.

"How do we end up?" wondered Thiana.

"Hard to tell," said Bromburg. "We can't do anything to them and, as far as we know, they can't do anything to us unless we open the lock panels and let them in. It looks as if it will be a siege. We can live for months and months yet, shut in as we are."

"I'm against that," said Duvelskoe. "Let's open up and dare some of them in. I'd rather die with my teeth in a throat, granting that these things have throats."

"We won't open up until I order it," rejoined Bromburg. "There may be a way out yet. For instance, if only they weren't watching us on all sides, somebody could slip out in a space-suit with the disintegrator. Then

it would be a simple job to cut away all those threads and we could get out of here."

Still the ship was dragged along. The three inside took turns at sleeping, for they were genuinely tired. At last Bromburg, at the forward port, called his companions to him.

"There's the end of our journey, or I'm mistaken," he said, pointing to a great dark patch ahead. The disc-creatures pulled them closer. They came upon and above a surface that seemed to be of tangible substance. Looking down upon it, they exclaimed in amazement.

It was a disc-creature, unthinkable large! Its great, irregular circle was as broad as a landing field, and the jet-black surface pulsed and throbbed with life. As their captors pulled the Nonpareil toward it they saw, here and there, shining spots like outcroppings of glassy quartz upon a bank of earth. Around the edges of the great body moved groups of smaller discs. As they watched, the explorers saw that these issued from the big disc itself.

"Either they break away like buds, or else they live in cavities in that giant pancake," said Duvelskoe. "I wonder which."

His question was answered a moment later, when the creatures that held the ship dropped upon the black bosom of their huge counterpart. Before the surprised eyes of the watchers, they seemed to plunge into the substance, lose themselves in it. Within less than a minute they had completely merged, leaving the captive vessel bound to the gigantic bulk by the many woven cords.

"Why, they're all part of the same creature!" said Bromburg. "They've gone back into it now, and those yonder are just so many fragments, breaking loose! This is unthinkable—scientists won't believe it!"

Duvelskoe was peering through a periscope that gave a view beneath the keel of the Nonpareil.

"I doubt very much if the scientists will have a chance to consider its possibility," he said. "Have a look at this."

The periscope revealed one of the shining spots directly beneath them. On all sides of it the confining cords were made fast to the strange monster. As the human captives watched, the quartz-like glitter became a warmer, brighter gleam. It grew larger and more intense, until a ray rose from it toward the hull of the ship.

"That's a natural lens," said Bromburg. "It's focusing light from beyond—probably it extends clear through the disc's substance and is gathering the rays of the incandescent body at the center of Jupiter."

"But what's it trying to do?" put in Thiana.

"That's plain enough," answered Duvel-

skoe. "It wants to burn a hole in us, then send in a few pieces of itself to see what's what. Oh it knows that there is meat in the nut, all right! Look, there's the raiding party now."

SURE enough, a score or more of disc-creatures, the size of cartwheels and larger, were gathering below the ship.

"It'll take some time to burn a hole big enough for those," said Duvelskoe. "The old Nonpareil is as well made as they come. But sooner or later our friend with the burning glass will succeed in its mission."

He and Bromburg went through the hatchway end and, with their field of gravity reversed, climbed to the spot where the ray was striking. Already the metal of the hull was getting hot. They returned to the control room deeply concerned.

"Again I say, let them in!" urged Duvelskoe. "Let them in, or let me out. If I have to fight with things like that, I want to do it down there where I can dance a gypsy clog on the big boy's belly. What do you say, Rolf? Let's carve our names on them for the next expedition to read!"

"Not yet," said Bromburg. "I'd rather get away from here alive."

"But how?"

"If ever we had the chance, it's now. All those disc-things are down below. One of us can get up above with the disintegrator and chop us a way out of the network before they catch on. It'll have to be done quickly, though."

"Then let's do it," said Duvelskoe running to a locker. "Help me into a space-suit—I'll need it out in that poison fog."

He dragged out the clumsy-looking garment of metal-strengthened fabric and began to get into it.

"Wait," ordered Bromburg. "It was my idea, and I'm captain. It's my place to make the venture."

"Your place, nothing. Your place is in here, at the controls. We can't get away otherwise."

"And your place is at the lookout."

"Thunder, that's so!" said the lieutenant. "Both our places are here. What'll we do?"

"Thiana will have to take the place of one of us," offered Bromburg.

Thiana shook her head. "I can't do that," she said. "I think I've demonstrated how little I know about running this ship."

"Then there's nothing to be done," said Duvelskoe, a hopeless note creeping into his voice at last.

"Only one thing," amended Thiana. "One thing can save us. Bromburg must stay at the controls; Duvelskoe must keep lookout; that leaves me to do the work outside."

Both men stared at her. Both opened their

mouths to speak, but she cut them off.

"You're going to say that it isn't my place. Well, it seems to be nobody's place at all! You'll tell me that it's dangerous. So is staying here, with that thing burning its way into us. And you'll argue that I'm too weak. But I'll show you. Help me into that space-suit."

"She's right, Rolf, and she means business," said Duvelskoe. He held the suit for her and she began to pull it onto her legs, body and arms.

"Well, it's a chance," admitted Bromburg, as if talking to himself. He took the glass-fronted space helmet and adjusted it on Thiana's head.

She looked out at him with smiling eyes. Her gloved hand, clumsy in its metal fittings, clasped his for a moment. Then she turned, took the ray projector Duvelskoe held out to her, and mounted the ladder toward the lock panel above.

CHAPTER VI

Escape

THIANA'S first sensation as she emerged on top of the hull was a terrifying heaviness.

She knew of course, that this was due to her leaving the insulated interior of the Nonpareil and coming into the open, where Jupiter attracted all bodies with a strength more than twice that of earth. She told herself as much, trying to quiet her fears; but she could not escape from the uncanny feeling of that added weight, which seemed intent on dragging her down and keeping her from the thing she had to do.

Her next sensation was that of heat, making itself felt through the sturdy fabric of her space-suit. And her third was that she was tied to the metal cleats to which she clung, just outside the lock-panel. The web of the disc-creatures lay upon her, preventing her from rising. She could only crawl, and that only with difficulty.

She turned on the mechanism of her ray and leveled it at the uneven network before her face. With deep satisfaction she saw the slender threads melt rapidly away. She quickly made a hole large enough to allow her to rise. It taxed her strength to attempt the later move and it took all the strength of her hands to force her body into an upright position.

The space-suit, designed for use on the outside of just such hulls as these, was furnished with boots that had magnetic soles, and Thiana was thankful for the firm foot-

ing they afforded her. Slowly she walked toward the nose of the ship, her ray ready in her hands.

But suddenly she was conscious of shadows in the mark around her. Looking to right and left, she saw great flocks of disc-creatures rising along the sides of the ship. Even as she looked, each creature sprouted a tendril toward her. A dozen of them, strong as steel wires, touched and encircled her.

Some instinct prompted her to drop down on all fours. Still clutching her ray-gun with one hand, she grabbed a cleat with the other and hooked both toes into the mass of threads that swathed the ship. As she did so, she felt a terrific pull exerted upon her. Had she remained standing, she would surely have been carried away by the attacking disc.

Thiana raised herself on the elbow of the arm that held the cleat, and with her other hand turned on her ray again. Quickly but accurately she swept its gleaming finger upward.

The destroying light touched one, then another, then a close-set group of discs. They seemed to explode before it, and great clouds of lead-colored vapor spread where they had been. Swinging her ray horizontally, she cut herself free from the clutching tendrils as if with a revolting blade. While the surviving assailants seemed to hesitate before this sudden destruction, she pushed herself onto her feet again and ran forward as fast as her failing strength could carry her.

A big disc flew into her face like a bat. She flung up an arm to strike it away. Her hand encountered something that felt like a mass of pudding and the thing broke to pieces as she hurled it aside with all her might.

A moment later she was standing at the very nose of the Nonpareil.

Her ray hit into the strands that bound it. She saw them fall away, or flash into nothingness altogether. The hull stirred under her feet now, was slipping out of the hole she was cutting for it. Again she felt lines flinging themselves about her waist, legs and arms, was almost torn from her stance. She threw herself onto her back, flashed her ray upward and laughed hysterically inside her helmet as she saw the round black spots that were her enemies break into clouds of disintegrated matter.

She lay tangled in the matted threads and felt the ship slipping from underneath her. She hurried forward on hands and knees, clutched a cleat, thrust her arm under it to the elbow. Almost simultaneously the Nonpareil nosed upward and, with a final flip of its stern, drew itself clear of its bonds.

BELOW she could see the vast spread of the giant disc. On its surface glowed, not one, but a dozen spots, their rays stabbing, too late, after the escaping craft *Breaking* away from the edges came whole generations of spinning pursuers, shooting their tendrils after the fugitive. The *Nooparell* gathered speed, left them behind. Lying on the slanted surface of the hull, she felt her weight grew apparently much greater. She dropped her ray-gun, wound both arms around the cleat, and prayed for strength to maintain her hold.

In years to come she was to remember as in a nightmare how the disc-creatures fell away, grew smaller and dimmer, until they were swallowed in the butter-colored fog; how the light below grew fainter and the light above grew brighter; how at last the mists thinned away and she cleared her vision to see that they were in free space, with the sun at an angle overhead and the blessed stars sprinkled over a sky as black as a velvet cloak.

Still she clung, while the cold of space crept in to banish the stuffy heat of inner Jupiter. She felt lighter, too, and more sure of herself. Soon she would attempt to crawl to that nearest lock panel and tap for admission.

But the panel slid open. A helmeted head came into view and turned its glass front toward her. Then two gloved hands reached out. She felt them on her shoulders. And now she seemed to grow light indeed, as light as thistledown, so that she would float away but for those strong hands that held her.

Things grew dim, then black, before her eyes. She slid into silent oblivion.

When she awoke she lay on a pallet in the control room. Bromburg's face, with brows furrowed in concern, bent close to hers. Over his shoulders she could see Duvelskoe at the keyboard, the pieces of her space suit scattered on the floor, all the familiar instruments and furnishings of the compartment. An arm was under her head—Bromburg's.

She reached up a finger and touched his cheek. His flesh was firm and comforting to feel.

"Situation well in hand?" he said, then smiled when she nodded.

"You were wonderful," he told her. "Could either of us have done more? I think not."

"It was downright heroic," put in Duvelskoe.

"I had to do it," said Thiana. "I'd dragged you into such an awful mess, it was up to me to get you out of it. Now do you think well of me at last?"

"Think well of you? I never thought otherwise."

"Really?" She touched his cheek again, letting her hand linger in a caress. He turned his head and kissed it.

"Do we—love each other?" she asked almost timidly.

He did not answer, but Duvelskoe saw their faces draw together. Quickly the lieutenant turned to study the chart on the table across the room, where the indicator pointed toward the red spark that was Mars and, beyond that, the dot that was Earth.



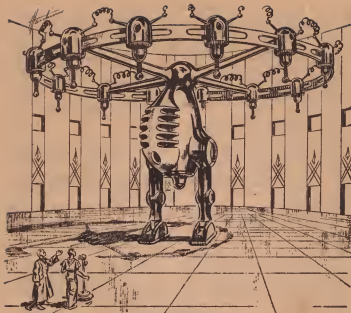
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NEXT ISSUE'S SCIENTIFICION HALL OF FAME STORY!



Going before the Arbiter, President Doyle called the matter of atomic power to the machine's attention

THE ARBITER

By JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

The thing was of metal—but it walked and thought like a man, and was a grim object of deadly peril and menace!

THE year of 2016—and peace. . . The wreckage of past ages of barbarism had been cleared away. All over the Earth stood flawless cities. The peoples had nothing to complain of. They lived in a tempered, happy world of smoothly working machines and vast foolproof control panels. But in this there perhaps lay the seeds of danger.

Selby Doyle, President of the Earth, voted into office by common consent, was a shrewd

man. Slim, wiry, with gray hair swept back from an expansive brow, there was little to stamp him as extraordinary, unless it was the resolute tightness of his lips or the squareness of his chin. Here was a man who reasoned, decided, and then acted.

He had accomplished all that he had set out to do and molded the world afresh. It gave him pleasure to sit as he was now, in the dim half light of the lowering night, his chair tilted back on its hind legs, his

gray eyes gazing on the lights of Major City as they sprang automatically into being at the scheduled times. The lower lights first, then the higher ones, as the tide of day ebbed from the deeper walks.

Presently he glanced round as the warning light on his great desk proclaimed somebody's approach. Instantly he was the chief magistrate—self-possessed, ready for his visitor. He closed the switches which filled the room with an intense yet restful brilliance.

The automatic door opened. Doyle sat looking at the tall man who crossed the threshold. Vincent Carfax, chairman of the Committee for Public Welfare, inclined his bald head in greeting.

"Your excellency!" he acknowledged, and stepped forward to shake hands.

Doyle waved him to a chair. Carfax was an inhuman index of a man who carried endless statistics in his agile brain. Poker-faced, emaciated as a skeleton, it was his proud boast that he had never been known to smile.

"You will overlook the lateness of the hour, Mr. President?" he asked at length, in his precise voice.

"I was about to leave," Doyle answered. "However, only an important matter could bring you here, Carfax. What is it?"

"Unrest."

"Unrest?" President Doyle raised his eyebrows. "Unrest in Major City? My dear fellow!"

"Unrest!" Carfax insisted. "I have suspected it for a long time, but I've refrained from bringing it to your notice until I was absolutely certain. Now I have conclusive evidence. Major City is resting on quicksand, your excellency."

DOYLE pondered for a moment. "Tell me about it," he invited.

"The facts are plain," Carfax answered slowly. "The reaction of perfect security after many years spent in wars and struggle is going directly against the adaptive strain Nature builds up. I have had the First in Biology check on that. The human body and mind, keyed to every emergency, had until recently something it could grapple with. Now there is nothing but perfection. The mind has of necessity to find a new form of excitation in order to maintain its equilibrium. Do I make it clear?"

"I provided science for the people," President Doyle said quietly. "Is not that exciting enough?"

"Science, sir, is for the chosen few. Men such as you and I, and all the other master-brains who have brought this sublime state into being, are different. Call them geniuses if you will. At least they do not represent

the masses. I have been forced to the unpleasant realization that very few minds are adapted to scientific study. Just as in the pre-Wars Era a man accepted the electric light for what it is without involving himself in the electronic processes embodied in it, so today there is that same aspect of laziness and torpor—and there, Mr. President, lie the seeds of unrest and mischief."

Doyle smiled. "It can be stopped. The Congress has the power."

"This goes deeper than you realize," Carfax said, shaking his bald head. "It is not confined to Major City. It exists nearly everywhere. So much so I felt it my duty to warn you. If this unrest is not quelled it means—back to war!"

The Chief Executive was silent.

"There is a way," Carfax said presently.

"There is?"

"It is becoming increasingly clear that the Last War did not entirely kill the belief in men's minds that force of arms is the only sure way to Right. The element of unrest now present will grow rapidly. At the moment it takes the form of vicious words. It would like to build up a barrier against all things scientific and tear down the perfect structure we have created. But I say—if I may—that the close of the Last War really did end war for ever!"

"Perhaps," The President smiled grayly.

"Listen," Carfax resumed, tapping his finger emphatically on the desk. "We must forever outlaw war as a disease. Until now Man has not had sufficient power at his disposal—scientific power that is—to make his dreams come true. The earlier men tried it with pacts, treaties, and leagues of nations—and they all came to grief—because there was no science back of them."

"And now?"

"Now, with tremendous scientific resources at our command, we can make a stand against this eternal enemy of progress, destroy it while it is still young," Carfax hesitated briefly and looked apologetic. "What I am about to say, your Excellency, may make it appear I am teaching you your business. You will forgive that?"

Doyle shrugged. "Only a fool refuses to learn. Continue."

"Many years ago men adopted the principle of arbitration," Carfax resumed. "They were enlightened enough, in civil matters at least, to place any matter of dispute, particularly in instances of capital and labor, before a council usually composed of three experts. That council was vested with complete power to say "Yes" or "No" upon the point at issue. Thus matters were arbitrated. Endeavors were made, futilely enough, to devise an arbitration scheme between nations.

"The principle of arbitration relied on the good faith of nations to seek arbitration, but lost in a welter of power politics and overcome with greed, backed by terrific man power and armaments, wars followed wars. Arbitration was ignored. But, sir, the idea was not lost. Why cannot a new arbiter arise? Not a man, not three men—but twelve! In olden times a jury was usually composed of twelve men and women. So in respect to that judicial tradition let it still be twelve. Twelve—to arbitrate!"

President Doyle sighed a little. "An excellent idea, old friend. But what twelve men or women, however competent, would be accepted by the masses as sole judges?"

"There comes the difference!" the Statistician said calmly. "I have been investigating on my own account. Ever since this unrest began I have pondered the idea of an Arbiter. I have interviewed, at great length, twelve men, each one of them equipped with the finest brain in the world for his particular sphere. The twelve major sciences of present day civilization can each have a master at the head. Yes, I have talked with them. Each one of them has foreseen as we have the grim fate that awaits mankind if unrest is allowed to prevail. Now I have their assurance, once the word is made lawful by you, that each one of them is prepared to sacrifice his life for the particular science he controls in order that the future of mankind may be assured."

DOYLE sat bolt upright. "Sacrifice his life!" he cried. "What on earth do you mean, man? Why should they?"

"Because there can be no other way to make a true Arbiter!"

The President got to his feet, stood by the window with his hands clasped behind him.

"Go on," he said, lost in thought.

"Twelve brains will be pooled for the common good," Carfax explained. "Twelve brains will work in unison to provide a common answer, and a just one, for every conceivable difficulty in every walk of life. Twelve brains, functioning as one unit, will be the judge of humanity's future actions and set discord at naught."

"Even brains die," President Doyle pointed out, turning. "It is only putting off the vital issue for a short period. When the brains die the old trouble will be back. This is just—a temporary panacea, making things comfortable for the present age. What of posterity, Carfax? That is the problem we must consider."

"The brains will never die!" the Statistician said, and at Doyle's look of astonishment he was tempted to smile. But remembering his one boast he didn't.

"I said we could outlaw unrest and war

forever, Mr. President. This is no hasty plan. I have conferred with Gascoyne, the First in Anatomy. He says the plan I have devised is feasible. Did it ever occur to you what a poor instrument the brain is for the interpretation of thought?"

"Often. What of it?"

"Gascoyne has asked himself that question long enough to find an answer. We of this age know science agrees that thought is everywhere, that it is expressed in greater or lesser degree according to the quality of the 'receiver' or brain interpreting it. According to Gascoyne a brain is basically an electric machine—a radio receiver, if you wish it. In proportion to its quality it absorbs and uses the ideas of all-pervading mind and expresses ideas clearly or badly through the medium of a physical body, which in itself is an expression of mind-force."

Doyle was clearly interested now. A faint, unaccustomed flush of pleasure stole into Carfax's pallid cheeks.

"Since, then, mind contains the quintessence of every known science," he went on, "certain brains—or receivers—are better fitted than others, and can be completely duplicated in a mechanical, imperishable mould! Every convolution of a brain, every neuron, every synaptic resistance, can be imitated just as surely as in old days an impression could be taken of a man's gums for the fitting of false dentures. It can be done just as surely as the artificial leg of today has false muscles."

President Doyle came back to the desk and stood waiting.

"With your sanction," Carfax finished slowly, "I propose to model twelve synthetic, imperishable brains on the exact convolutions and measurements belonging to these twelve scientists. It will be done in the fashion of taking a death-mask. The image of the face at death remains in the mask forever. In this case the mechanical brains will be modeled over the real ones, duplicating them in every detail. When this has been done, the mechanical equivalent will take over from the natural organ, probably with even better results because it will be devoid of the inevitable clogging of human construction. The real brain will shrivel and die afterwards, leaving the mechanical image."

"Once the operation is complete these mechanical brains will be linked together, will go on gaining knowledge with a speed compatible with that of an ordinary brain if it were permitted to live for eternity. That is how the Arbiter will become indestructible and a paragon of justice for all mankind."

Doyle thought, then shook his head.

"Even though I am the elected executive of all Earth, Carfax, I am still human. Twelve men to die if I give the word—it is unthinkable!"

The Statistician got to his feet, his pale face adamant.

"As the Chief Magistrate, Doyle, you have, to a certain extent, to be devoid of emotion. You spoke of posterity. Posterity can be assured by your word—now. And remember, the twelve will give their lives voluntarily. Think of the thousands of scientists in the past who have given their lives willingly for a less cause."

"But the decision to slay twelve did not rest with one man," President Doyle pointed out. Then he turned impatiently. "Carfax, don't misunderstand me. I see the value of your idea. I appreciate the great lengths you must have been to, to get the plan worked, but it would be better if the decision did not rest so completely with me!"

CARFAX shrugged. "The facts are plain enough," he said quietly. "The personal brain power of the twelve heat men will be pooled. Twelve will die, in order that thousands to come may live in peace!"

After a brief silence Doyle began to hedge with vague desperation. He drummed his fingers on the desk. There was an inhuman persuasion in Carfax's cold, emotionless voice.

"What guarantee have we that opposing factions will consult the Arbiter in any case?"

"We have the guarantee of twelve imperishable brains in a mobile machine—a machine controlled by thought waves reacting on special mechanisms. In the event of two opposing factions, the Arbiter will cut off all possible means that might lead to force between the parties concerned. Compulsory arbitration will come into being. It's that—or decay!"

"It is ruling by force," Doyle muttered. "Our present method is by votes."

"It is common sense! All other scientists are strongly in favor of the plan. I convinced them of its value. That leaves only your sanction."

"Not immediately, my friend. I must think." The President pressed a hand to his forehead. "Leave me for a while. I must talk with Gascoyne first. I'll acquaint you with my decision later."

As something apart he heard the soft click of the door as Carfax went. . .

Even after he had heard Rolf Gascoyne's fully detailed surgical description of the idea of the Arbiter, it took President Doyle several more days of deliberation before he finally gave his consent to the project. And he did it then only when he was assured of

the willingness of the twelve men concerned to sacrifice themselves in order that posterity might have an assured peace.

So he gave the order—and with the twelve men and Gascoyne he shut himself away from city affairs for a while in the surgical laboratories.

He answered no calls except those which demanded his personal attention, leaving everything else to Carfax, his deputy.

From then on Doyle watched activity in a field which was unfamiliar to him. He saw the twelve human beings go willingly under the anaesthetic. He saw the brains, still living, being fed by synthetic bloodstream and artificial heart. Then, under orders from Gascoyne, the first brain was duly imprisoned within a soft mould of ductile metal.

Atom by atom, molecule by molecule, under the control of instruments so sensitive that light-vibration disturbed them, metallic moulds were set up, fitted into place by slender rods of force timed to a split thousandth of a second, the slightest error in which would have meant utter failure.

But there was no error. Gascoyne saw to that. He was coldly efficient, intolerant of mistakes. The controlling forces made no slip. They had no human qualities in them to err.

Day after day the scientists worked on. From time to time Doyle received disquieting reports from Carfax concerning the rapid increase of unrest amongst the unscientific populace. He handed the information on to Gascoyne who promptly made a speed-up all round.

In a month the first brain was complete. The dried shell of the dead brain was removed and the mechanical counterpart, deadly precise in its way of reasoning, came into being. The actual entity of Unwin Slater, First in Mathematics, had vanished and given place to the computations of Brain Unit No. 1.

Thereafter it was not difficult. Assured now of success in the operation, Doyle felt a little more easy in mind—and the experts worked steadily on. Brain after brain was linked up, until at the end of three months the transference was complete. The knowledge of each was unified to the other by delicate vibratory wires, and thence carried back to a central brain pan—in truth a contrivance of machinery of profound complexity, reactive only to the thoughts of twelve combined brains.

Gascoyne had been clever here. Without twelve brains in unity the machinery would not function, and since this seat of all motivation and pooled knowledge was protected by metals of interlocking atoms, the Arbiter was absolutely foolproof. In fact, the more the atoms of the housing metal continued

to disorganize, the more impossible it would be to break down.

ON OCTOBER 9, 1916, the Arbiter became visible in public for the first time. In appearance it resembled a great circle of metal about fifty feet wide, studded at regular intervals round the edge with unbreakable domes which sheathed the metallic brains inside. The wires, protected by similar armor, led directly to the circle's center wherein stood the governing machine-unit. For locomotion the thing possessed skillfully jointed metal legs, perfectly balancing the circle of metal they carried. In many ways the Arbiter resembled an enormous wheel studded with twelve nodules and supplied with feet.

In response to public demand, after Doyle's initial introduction of it and outline of its purpose, it gave a brief speech, world-relayed. Its thought waves, passing into photoelectric devices, which in turn forced air through replicas of human vocal cords, produced a voice that was completely impartial and yet arresting.

"People of the world, you are asked to forget that this contrivance is the carrier of twelve brains," the great machine said. "It is a unity, a single unity with a twelve-fold purpose. That purpose is peace on earth and goodwill towards men. To that end I, the Arbiter, will work. Let any man or woman who thinks of transgressing the peace pause now and think! The Arbiter stands ready!"

Thereafter the Arbiter was allowed complete liberty. It was entirely self-contained, sleepless. It moved as it chose, but usually stayed pretty close to Major City.

Its first decisive action was to subdue to a considerable extent the activities of the restive ones. With an uncanny sense of deduction it unearthed a plot whereby a thousand unscientific insurgents were plotting to seize a territory between Major City and its nearest neighbor one hundred miles away. The insurgents had hoped to establish a colony for themselves. Had they succeeded they would undoubtedly have been the first to break the unity of a great world-wide nation in which all class distinction and creed had been leveled into one brotherhood.

But the Arbiter sifted the rebels' plans from top to bottom, and since in this case there was no question of arbitration between parties the mechanical judge took the next most effective step.

One by one the entire thousand met death, ruthlessly, inexplicably—but certainly. The scientists became a little worried. That the first act of the Arbiter should be to slay without question was something of a shock.

If it did nothing else, the action at least

quelled all the other restive spirits. They turned in increasing numbers to scientific study, finding an unexpected pleasure in the struggle to wrest the ultimate secrets from Nature.

Thereafter, for a year, the Arbiter had little of importance to do. It sorted out minor disputes with calm, emotionless words and its decision was implicitly obeyed. President Selby Doyle felt satisfied. His first fears had vanished. The Arbiter was a panacea after all. Then came the affair of Grenson, the physicist.

Grenson, a young and ardent man of the New Era, was sure that he had discovered the real meaning of an electron's wave and particle motion. Working alone in his laboratory he knew that he was on the verge of probing the long sought for secret of power from the atom.

Immediately, he went to the President, stood at the desk and looked for the first time upon the quiet, calm personage who ruled the world.

"Sit down, young man," Doyle invited at last, eying his visitor steadily and inwardly deciding that he liked him. "Sit down and give me the full details."

Grenson gathered his courage. President Doyle snapped a recording switch then he sat back to listen to the rush of eager, excited phrases. For fifteen minutes Grenson held forth on the possibilities of his invention, still theoretical, and through it all the Chief Executive sat in silence, linking up the points in his keen mind, fitting together postulation with postulation, bringing his own far-reaching knowledge to bear on the subject.

At last Grenson became silent, flushed with his own energies.

Doyle gave him an encouraging smile.

"In theory, young man, I should say your scheme is feasible. If so, you may be sure that Major City will fully reward you. But first we must have advice in this very specialized field." He pressed the switch of his intercom. "Send in the First in Physics," he ordered.

FOR ten minutes President and worker sat in silence, the young man looking round the great office and Doyle busy at his desk. Then Horley Dodd, the First in Physics, arrived—a sharp-nosed, scrub-headed man with thick-lensed eyeglasses.

"You want me, sir?" His tone was by no means pleasant.

"Yes, Dodd, I do. This young man here, if his theory is as good as it sounds, has the secret of atomic power. Just listen to the playback of his exposition."

President Doyle flicked a button. There was silence as Grenson's eager voice came forth from the audiograph. The First in

Physics stood with his hands locked behind him, biting his lower lip and staring up at the ceiling. The voice ceased at last. An automatic switch started the sound track ribbon reeling back to the start again.

"Well?" the President asked, leaning back in his chair.

"Frankly, I'd say it's impossible!" Dodd said briefly. "It is at best a mere theory, and as such does not advance us one iota beyond what we already know."

"That is a very narrow viewpoint," the President observed.

Dodd's sharp little eyes sparked defiance. "It's the only viewpoint, your Excellency."

"But, sir, I have it all worked out!" Grenson sprang to his feet earnestly. "Naturally, I am a man of only moderate means. I cannot afford the costly apparatus necessary to prove my idea. That is why I brought the scheme to the President. Now you say it's no good."

"You had no right to bring it here!" Dodd snapped.

"He had every right," the President said. "What is more, Dodd, I have neither time nor patience for this unseemly wrangling." He got to his feet decisively. "We have the Arbiter to decide such things for us. Come into the laboratory, both of you."

He preceded the pair to a sealed interdoor and opened it. They passed within to the monster of legs and nodules occupying the center of the floor.

"Arbiter, a question arises," President Doyle stated quietly, stopping before the thing's sensitive pickup. "Is the theory of atomic force about to be given to you practical—or not?" He turned aside and switched on a relay of Grenson's voice-record. Again that silence and Grenson stood with his gaze uncertainly watching the glittering monster that was to determine his life's ideal.

After long thought at the close of the exposition the Arbiter spoke.

"The theory of Grenson is not practicable! The secret of atomic power will never be found because the very nature of the atom makes it impossible. The judgment is awarded to Horley Dodd."

The First in Physics smiled acidly and glanced at the President. Doyle was stroking his chin slowly. Then he turned to the dazed Grenson and patted him gently on the shoulder.

"I am sorry, my boy—I really am. I did feel that you had something, but the Arbiter cannot be wrong. The decision is final."

"Final!" Grenson shouted. "Do you think I am going to take the opinion of a thing like this—this Arbiter? Do you think I shall give up a theory because a few canned brains say so? Not on my life! I'm going on, and on. Yes, I'll make the money somehow to

prove my idea."

He swung round, red-faced with anger, and vanished through the doorway. Doyle watched him go, then shrugged.

"You're too sentimental, Mr. President," Dodd said brusquely. "You allow too many of these crack-brained theorists to take advantage of you. He has the wrong idea entirely. What he and his sort need is control, not encouragement."

"As long as I am Chief Magistrate I shall make my own decisions," Doyle answered quietly. "I shall not need to detain you any longer, Dodd. Thank you for coming."

The scientist went out and President Doyle returned slowly into his own office, stood by the desk, thinking. That young man had had a great idea, and somehow he was convinced it should have been tested.

It was towards evening when the private wire buzzed. Doyle took up the receiver and Vincent Carfax's lean, cold visage came onto the screen.

"Your Excellency, I understand from my agents that you had a young man to see you today? Chap named Grenson? And that the decision of the Arbiter went against him?"

"Correct."

"He died at five thirty this afternoon! He was slain by mind-force from the Arbiter. I thought it would interest you."

DOYLE stared at the screen fixedly. "You are sure?"

"I never make mistakes," Carfax answered dispassionately. "I don't like it, this continued display of force!"

"No. Neither do I!"

President Doyle cut off, his jaw set with uncommon hardness. He got to his feet and walked into the adjoining laboratory, stood staring at the metal monster. Even as he stood making his survey he could sense the inhuman aura the thing radiated.

"Arbiter, you slew without provocation!" he snapped suddenly. "Why? I demand to know. You told Grenson he was wrong, but what need was there to murder him as well?"

"That question is outside your province. You are the President, yes, but you had me created for the undisputed adjudication of all matters capable of argument, for the carrying out of these adjudications afterwards. The only way to prevent a continued disobedience of commands is to kill! Grenson, in spite of my decision, was determined to work in spite of me. So he died. So it must always be with those who are defiant. Otherwise, the purpose of the Arbiter is lost."

"But it's barbarism!" President Doyle cried hoarsely. "The very thing I believed you'd stop!"

"I am not answerable to anybody for what

I believe or think," the Arbiter answered implacably.

"But suppose young Grenson had been right? Suppose he had touched the verge of unlocking atomic power? Think what it could have meant to us. We need that power. Earth's stores of petroleum, coal, and certain metals cannot last much longer. Supplies were drained to the uttermost in building and equipping the cities. Atomic power would solve many things at one bound. Even the correct transmutation of elements, a secret we desperately need to find. At the least you could have let Grenson go on experimenting."

"Not in face of my decision. I acted as I saw best. So far as I am concerned the matter is finished."

Doyle hesitated, staring at the thing hitherly, then with clenched fists he went slowly from the laboratory. Somewhere, he knew, something was wrong. The treasured plans for security had gone utterly awry.

Very gradually it was forced on the adherents of scientific progress that the Arbiter was anything but what it was intended to be. Science became divided into two camps—the strugglers and the opposers, with Dodd as chief of the opposers.

Dodd, though a scientist, firmly believed in the inaccessibility of Nature's inner secrets, and had neither vision nor tolerance. He was too content to accept science for what it was rather than for what it might become. In that very fact lay the seed of disaster. The camp of Science, divided against itself, began to show signs of decay.

Time and again the Arbiter was called in, and every time the verdict went to Horley Dodd and his party. Baffled, sickened by the obvious breakdown in the scheme for universal peace, President Selby Doyle's grip on things commenced to weaken. Already worn out with the cares of office, to which had been added crushing disappointment, the illness which preceded his demise was brief.

Officials were present round his death bed—but officials were all they were, men who had served him because it had been their duty to serve. To the dying President there was only one face which represented loyalty and friendship, and it belonged to Vincent Carfax.

"Carfax, you must be President," Doyle whispered. "As—as it is my final wish, you will be chosen. All around this bed are the men who will elect you. I have their promise. I think that I have—have been too lenient, but no such emotions will trouble you, Carfax. You are younger. You are an expert scientist. You must defeat this Arbiter, my friend. Find out why it has turned traitor! You promise?"

"I promise," Carfax answered.

President Doyle relaxed and smiled. It was a smile that remained fixed. The President of the Earth was dead.

An hour later the assembled scientists, all of them leaders on the side of the Strugglers, filed into the main office to face their new President. They found Carfax at the great desk, coldly silent. He waited until the group was fully assembled, surveyed them, then got to his feet.

"Gentlemen, for seven years now we have been chained hand and foot by an invention of our own making—a metal dictator—and it has betrayed us. We don't know why, yet—but we do know that unless we defy this Arbiter, or find forces which can destroy it, we are a doomed people."

CASCOYNE shook his head. "We cannot destroy it—at least not in the light of present scientific knowledge," he said seriously. "We made the thing of a metal whose atoms interlock, remember. It is sealed forever. We made it foolproof—and to what end?"

"It is in our own hands to determine the end," President Carfax retorted. "Unless we act, we're finished. It is the very law of the Universe that there must be progress. Every day now brings us up against new difficulties. Sources of power are running low. New sources, intended for us by Nature, are barred because the brains that would develop them are prevented by this twelve-brained monstrosity. I tell you we must defeat it!"

Assured that he might be able to succeed, President Carfax went to work to prove his words. The strugglers began anew the experiments which had been truncated by the death of Grenson.

They worked to within an ace of solving the secret of atomic power. Carfax himself got far enough to extract a terrific amount of energy from a cube of copper. From incredibly small pieces of highly conductive metal he built up a model power plant which, on a giant scale, would replace the already sadly worn electric equipment from which the cities derived their light and power.

The other scientists explored different realms. Some reasoned out new methods of synthesis by which the fast waning supplies of oil and coal could be replaced. Another was convinced that he had transmutation of metals in his grip, with which the cities could be repaired as time went on. Yet another saw his chance of harnessing the waste energy of the sun.

By degrees, under Carfax's fine leadership, the determined scientists began to lay plans for the foundation of real Utopia.

Then the Arbiter struck! In a public speech it declared that the discoveries claimed by President Vincent Carfax and his colleagues

were nothing better than fancy. The Arbiter took sides with the Opposers and launched a small but savagely effective massacre against the Strugglers. In three days of desperate skirmish and slaughter Carfax and his followers were wiped out. Horley Dodd, leader of the Opposers, was killed too. Not that it signified much. The Opposers were now in complete control, backed always by the impartial Arbiter.

Languid with victory, the Opposers lazily repaired the damage and then sat back to enjoy the comforts which Vincent Carfax had sworn were coming to an end. Apathy set in, born of lack of anything to accomplish. Even the Arbiter had nothing left to judge. The final vanquishment had shown to the Opposers that progress was a form of disease and entirely unnecessary. Better to relax and enjoy the fruits of labor.

The year 2018 passed away and was followed by a gap of somnolent, drifting years until 2030. Nothing had been accomplished, nothing done. Life was one grand bliss of effortless satisfaction. The pioneers were lost in the mists of memory. Science, as an art, had ceased to be.

2030—2050—2070—and the Arbiter was still in faultless condition. Indeed it had been made indestructible.

Men and women died, children were born in limited numbers, grew up, each one knowing less of science than those before them. Astronomy, physics, mathematics? They were things the ancients had studied, said the history records. Somewhere in the smeared archives was the name of Selhy Doyle.

Then in 2070 came the first warnings of the trouble Carfax had foreseen. The weather-controlling machinery broke down, its central bearings worn out from continued inattention. In consequence the weather suddenly reverted to its former unreliable state and deluged whole continents of synthetic crops, destroyed a world's food supply for a year.

Hurricanes tore across the world. Cities which were slowly eroding through continued lack of repair eroded still more. That gray metal, so shiny at first, was cracking now, flaking under the continued onslaught of the elements.

A nervous flurry passed through the people. For the first time they were really alarmed. They rushed to the weather controlling station but could only stare helplessly at silent, useless machinery. Knowledge was dead.

This was not all. Trouble came thick and fast. With the failure of the crops, animals began to die off. The machines that tended them only functioned so long as they received—from still other machines—steady supplies of crops, specially developed for cattle consumption. When the supply stopped the

machines stopped too, and nobody knew what to do about it.

THE seed of disaster flourished with terrific speed, burst the foundations of the formerly calm cities and upset the tranquillity of the pleasure-softened people. The collapse of the weather machinery presaged the overture to the end. Blinding cataracts of rain seeped through corroded roofs, the water short-circuiting the vital power and light machinery, already at breaking point through wear and tear.

Light and power failed in each city simultaneously. Famine reared over a disturbed, turmoil world girt about with scurrying clouds. In desperation the people turned to the Arbiter, their leader.

But the Arbiter did nothing! It ignored the wild pleas hurled at it, marched out of the insecure laboratory that was its home and departed into the storm-lashed country. In the hour of need it had deserted them.

Panic seized the people at the realization. They fled from the cities, whither they knew not, floundered in a mad exodus seeking food that was not there, cursing aloud to the heavens because synthesis had destroyed all natural growth and cultivation. Specialization had been proved a tragedy. Escape from a world which was too perfect became an obsession.

Gradually, inevitably, it was forced upon the people in those hours of mad struggle and desperation that they were face to face with certain extinction.

2080. Panic and struggle had gone. A strange calm was on the world. Cities, crumbled through disease, ravaged by tempest and flood, poked blind, inquisitive spires to cleared skies. The sun crossed a sky which was, in the main, peaceful again. Climate had adjusted back to its normal vagaries.

But the soft winds of spring, the hot sun of summer, the cool chill of the fall, and the heavy snows of winter fell on bones that were scattered, white and forgotten, across Earth's face. Alone in this world of emptiness, where natural grass and trees were trying once more to struggle through, there moved a cumbersome affair of metal, still cold and impartial, inhuman and relentless. It climbed mountains, it prowled plains, it searched the ruins of cities, it brooded alone. The Arbiter.

3000 A.D. 3020 A.D. Then the Venusians came.

They were strange, birdlike creatures, masters of space travel, lords of their own peculiar science. They came not as conquerors but with the intention of making friends with the third-world people. Their amazement was complete when they could not find a soul alive.

Then eventually they found the Arbiter. With their superior science they analyzed it, probed its deepest secrets, broke open the supposedly impenetrable sheathing by four-dimensional tools.

THE Venusians remained on Earth for several days while the leading scientist, Cor Santa, pondered over the curious mystery of a lost race. From studying the disassembled Arbiter and the still remaining records of human events, transcribed by the Leader of Languages, he built up an explanation of the problem.

"Poor earthly scientists!" was his final comment. "Brilliant men indeed—but they forgot one thing. If a world or people is to survive it must have progress, even as we have found in our own experience. Wars are indeed evil and should be prevented. But dictators are worse. Right alone can prevail in the end.

"Selby Doyle and Vincent Carfax did not trust to Right, to a Universal mind control for guidance. No, they invented a machine of twelve mechanical brains to bring them peace. Such a device could not solve the problem. They forgot that a brain, in progressing, must expand. We have seen that, in any case, these Earth beings only used a fifth of their full brain capacity. That, later, would have developed. But in the machine

they strangled it. Carfax and the surgeon Gascoyne made these mechanical brains fixed to what was, at that time, the present! To the Arbiter it was always the present! Being rigid metal the imprisoned brains could not expand, could not go a step beyond the day of their creation. That is why the Arbiter destroyed all things that suggested progress, and also because it feared any sign of progress would bring its power to an end. It was just another dictator.

"Such metal bound brains, living in a past world, could not visualize anything progressive. Conservationism gone mad! From the instant the brains were moulded of metal they deteriorated. And having no human sentiment they destroyed without question. So when the great catastrophe came the Arbiter was powerless—as powerless as all the others who had not kept pace with progress. Nature must progress, or perish. That is evolution."

Thereon Cor Santa ended his observations. But when his fleet of spaceships soared through the sunny sky towards fresh worlds of exploration, there was left behind a smashed, irreparable mass of melted cogs, wires, and wheels. It was a rusting monument to a race that had died—a race that had fallen prey to laziness and surrendered its freedom to the ruthless whims of a machine.

THE ETHER VIBRATES

(Continued from page 9)

the spaceways, Raymond F. Hass. He may be a union musician, but apparently the union doesn't suit him. Or something doesn't. He should dine on curdled snails and sour spinach—or perhaps that is just what's ailing him. As for you, Rick, we're getting ready to shoot anyone who dares to send you an English Grammar II. Just stay your own unspoiled self. We love it.

ZOWIE!

by Robyn le Roy, "A Voice That Sells"

Dear sir,

Brief first nôt re TWS, Feb '47
Becyep beten'n usual, but unassessèd
Finlay excellent
Socetr agreeat good. Lynstr is slipting
"Pleasir Age" and SMOL bôth edre teul morals.
Lyk't bôth.
"Chun Hém" hak on ded plot. Fûet!
Uhrz passible.
Redropsis—beten'n ever. Kepitup!
The NO SR exelent. Afting TWS out ur myr.
Al uither—bwy bother?
Want kontrobersè? Iôz got nû flonate?
Y hav—and will expound from wun pjô definishun to
500 pjô tretis on rekwest. Enr Têkz?
Brôfnuf—Aarnwest 2, 546 South Cedar Street,
Galesburg, Illinois.

If U want tu hav ur blok nokd awf, Robyn,
just try mailing us that tretis.

Sometimes we pause to ponder the strange ways of humanity as it passes our desk in letter form—and from now on we shall be banging our head against the wall to our right, wondering what in hades Robyn's voice sells? One sure thing—it certainly doesn't spell. Come back, Sneary, all is forgiven!

HE EXPLAINS HIS INSULTS!

by Ed Farnham

Dear Sir: I am writing this letter for the sole specific Purpose of explaining just WHY I wrote the so VERY insulting letter to Ye Sarge a few weeks ago.

1st: The Letter was written for the Sole Purpose of stirring up a rumpus in TEV and THE. In an effort to put some LIFE into both, I deliberately insulted Three Writers and Ye Sarge. I also insulted the Author of the latest C. Future.

2nd:

Since it is apparent that The Letter is not to see print, I am writing THIS to APOLOGIZE TO ALL CONCERNED, as it is my desire to correct, if possible, the IMPRESSION which I know my last letter created. To wit: That I, Ed Farnham, am one dyed-in-the-wool, pure-bred SKONK.

3rd:

I would like to offer my most sincere, deeply humble and repentant apologies, and to herein ask your forgiveness for THAT LETTER, for the reasons stated above.

Thrilling Wonder Stories and Startling Stories have always been, are now and always will be, the Best in their field. HOWEVER, I reserve the Right to Find Fault when and where I see fit, doing so ONLY when and where I feel justified.

Trusting that you—among others—will for this once grant me a Full Pardon, and assuring you of continued support—1139 East 46th Street, Chicago 15, Illinois.

Since your editor honestly has no memory of the alleged insult, he is a trifle baffled by the above. Whom else could you have offended, Ed? Come on and let us in on it—especially since your most prodigious insults bounced merrily off this leathery editorial hide into the waste basket.

ORCHIDS AND ONIONS

by Gerry T. Crane

Dear Editor: I have two orchids and two onions for you, also a query. The query first.

Are you and your mate of TWS the same person? Now for the orchids.

(1.) I love Kuttner, Hammond, Hamilton, Leinster. Please continue.

(2.) Thanks for abolishing your one dark spot—those BEMERS.

And now the onions.

(1.) Everyone knows Kuttner is Hammond, so why keep up the doubletalk?

(2.) Everyone else Marchioni and raves over Finlay. Personally I hate Finlay and while I'm not fond of Marchioni I prefer him. Cuch, but this waste-basket is hard—but I still love you.—Albany, New York.

Answer to query—yes, oh yes, alas yes! Thanks for the purty flowers. As for your Kuttner-Hammond sirloin—if they were the same (which we are in no sense admitting) it would make our contents pages look like the devil to have so many of the same author present. As for Finlay vs. Marchioni—your taste is your own, but you're taking your life into your own big feet, Gerry.

FAVOR FOR A LADY?

by Mrs. Rose La Savio

Dear Sir: This is the first time I've written you. I have a special favor to ask and hope you can help me out. But first, comments on the January SS.

THE STAR OF LIFE by Hamilton is pretty good. But tell me, why did Thayne Marston have to die? Why couldn't she and Kirk Hammond live happily ever after—of something like that. Otherwise I liked it very much.

TRAVELER'S TALE is okay. However, it should have been longer and more definite. Why doesn't Whitley write a novel for SS? FRIENDS AND VENUS MINES INC. were fair.

THE DARK WORLD in the July issue by Kuttner is very much like A. Merritt. Merritt had more fantasy in his stories, but just the same Kuttner is good.

All of which leads me to my favor. I have had Merritt's BURN, WITCH, BURN, his THE MOON POOL and DWELLERS IN THE MIRAGE. But I cannot get hold of CREEP, SHADOW, CREEP, THE FACE IN THE ABYSS or THE SHIP OF ISHTAR. Do you know how I can get hold of them. I'd appreciate very much any help you can give me.—463 Southern Boulevard, Bronx 25, New York.

Okay—students! Somebody give Mrs. La Savio the information she needs. All the Ed. knows is that he had for a time in the summer of 1945 a reprint pocket sized two-bit

edition of THE FACE IN THE ABYSS which has since vanished.

So you want a happy ending on Hamilton's piece? Tsk, tsk! Shame! Besides, who lives happily ever after—while married at any rate? It is our impression that such delicate adult adjustments demand a lot more than futuous bliss. At any rate, you give Kuttner a pat on the back—if a faint-hearted one. Write us again and get your other ear pinned neatly back.

WHAT'S THE GOOD WARD?

by Rex E. Ward

Gentlemen "The Star of Life", by Edmond Hamilton, takes first-place honors by far in the January 1947 issue. Of course, that is only to be expected when you see "Edmond Hamilton" locked on a story. Without a doubt, Ed is the best writer in the field—in my opinion.

In second place is "Venus Mines, Incorporated", by Nat Schachtner & Arthur Leo Zagat. I was certainly glad to see a story in print again by a couple of old-timers; among the best, too. It definitely is worthy of the publication it resided in "The Hall of Fame".

"Travelers Tale", by George Whitley, was an interesting little short. More from this author's type-writer will be welcome.

In last place, is Murray Leinster's "Friends". It was good, very good. In fact I'd call it a tie with Whitley's.

I'm glad to see Leo Morey back; he always was one of my favorite authors. By the way, the cover this issue was excellent! One of Bergey's best! That fellow's good—hang on to him. One of the greatest things you've done yet is to start to uphold him in the "Ether Vibrates".

Also, I'm glad that Murray Leinster's finally doing a novel for Startling Stories. It's his first, and I'll wager it'll be his best!

Here's something for you to mull over for the next two or three years: Don't forget that in June 1939, the first issue of Thrilling Wonder Stories appeared on the stands. That means that in June 1948, it'll be that magazine's twentieth anniversary! Let's have something big then! And the same for Startling in 1948: it'll be Startling's tenth anniversary then. Perhaps the paper shortage will ease up a bit by then, and we can combine the two magazines in one GIGANTIC issue, and really make a hit!—438 Main Street, El Segundo, California

Thanks for the hoopla, Rex, old bean, but hold on there and don't let those statistics drop until we can peruse them with a magnifying lens.

You are, we discover, correct on Leinster never before doing a novel for SS and on the birthdate of this magazine, January, 1939. But THRILLING WONDER was born in August, 1936, becoming THRILLING WONDER STORIES in February, 1937. It is true that WONDER STORIES, its sire, saw the light in June, 1929, but that is another story and another magazine. The gigantic issue you speak of sounds like on heck of an editorial head and backache. However, we'll see. . . .

RAVIN' FROM SLAVIN'

by Rickey Slavin

Dear Sir: I'm writing this as an apology, both to myself and Edmond Hamilton. You see, for quite a while, I was under the misapprehension that his stories

were back, and not worth reading. I found out my mistake when I read *STAR OF LIFE* in the Jan. 58.

It was great, mainly because it described emotions and thoughts as I would like to experience them, and also because there was much truth in what he said. The catch in the gift of everlasting life has been written of, and spoken of before, but I doubt that any other writer could have made it hit so near home.

Evolution and its results have been a hobby of mine, for many years. I know that I have no real education in the field, but I prefer to think what the effects of accelerated evolution would be, and their effect on human beings. It does not seem so foolish as it may sound, but there is always the thought that Man may not like to realize that there would be a time when all his doings have been superseded by a greatly superior race.

Did you warn me that all the plots were to be by Marston? Well, except for the ones for the shorts, and the illegible signature of Leo Morey or something.

Perusing the letter column, I came across the name of one of my fellow ESFA members, Lee Budoff. I never realized that she was a poet, but so are you for that matter. Where in the seven green-colored moons of Xanthippe is Joe Kennedy? Chad Oliver and Sneydy had nothing to do with the boredom that came immediately I realized that there was no letter from Joe.

Hmm. I had to wait till I got a little calmer before I could think about the cover. If Bergey has to have scantily-clad females, why doesn't he include a note about where we could get those lovely—ummm—bras, and crumblonabiest—1628 Conway Island Ave., Bayside 30, New York.

Dear Miss Slavin—My dear Miss Slavin! Yours is the most unique comment on the Bergey covers we've yet seen!

IT HAD TO HAPPEN TO US!

by William E. Rose

Raymond Ham has went and said it, now I have no cause to dread it.

As I strive to tell in halting rhyme and rimes.

For it was a duty drive, to "tell off" in terms specific

This most select and select bunch of geeks.

As the four that Raymond mentions, and in spite of

good intentions

They are ready for those comfy padded rooms.

Poor old Gabriela's puerile toolings, bring forth dark

and mute

Computings, of the galleons and the rifle and the ax.

While my blood comes near congealing, at the brazen

Jackass pealing

Of old Chaddy, Nickie Sneydy and the "Joker".

Tell me why, oh, doughty Saturn, do you let this stuff

so "blatant"

Charter pages of an erstwhile "Solid Book?"

Reader Ham should be commended, if you do as he

intended.

In assisting dear old Bergey in his work,

Photograph these ardent fellows, with/without their

hot-air bellows

And on the covers of our "Mag" just let them

smirk!—P. O. Box 430, Beaumont, Texas

As the august Gen'l manager
Of a Rose more Gray than tan'ger
Tool Company of Beaumont down in Tex.
May your backside soon be tender
As a second-time offender
For you know just how we treat you
horse's necks.

For while one verse submission
May air out your erudition
A double dose of verse ain't bad—it's
verse.

So retract your horrid braying,
Which in truth is most dismaying
Before your editor calls out the hearse.

And while a rose by any name may still
be quite as red

We cannot help but feel that this one
should have stood in bed.

For some reason we can't for the life of
us figure out, we seem to wish we could
think of something to rhyme with Mr. Rose's
last word—i.e. SMIRK. Perhaps some of you
can help us out and apply it to him.

WE ATTAIN VARSITY STANDING

by Peter W. Tappan

Dear Sir: The first science-fiction novel I ever read was a Captain Future story. It was by Brett Sterling. It was good. Very good. That was three years ago and I have been reading science fiction ever since. Last winter I read *OUTLAW WORLD*, another Captain Future novel, by Ed Hamilton. It was the most exciting sci story ever passed my eyes over. I didn't work, I didn't eat, I didn't sleep until I had finished it.

I recently read *THE SOLAR INVASION* by Manly Wade Wellman, which appeared in the fall issue of SS. If I had never heard of Captain Future before, I would have rated the story as fair. However, after the Hamilton yarn, it was the most complete letdown I ever experienced in sci. Wellman leans on the wonderful characters created by another author to pull through his weak plot. He makes of Cap Future a characterless superhero. Will SS become a magazine which means reads to her boy of five as he struggles comfortably in her lap? I hope not.

The three short stories were all good. Keep it up, with the accent on Leinster and Hamilton. SS is one of the best sci magazines published—Mathews 38, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

As Captain Future and his comrades were Hamilton's creation, there is no question but that he handled the entire concept better than anyone else. But during the war there was, alas, no Hamilton. So Brett Sterling took over, and did an excellent job until he too got called up. Manly Wade Wellman's gain, we thought, carried on the Future tradition nobly—and we're sorry it disappointed you.

OFF THE SPACE

by Tom Pace

Dear Sir: Everything and everyone goes through a slow evolution; viewpoints, psychologies, likes and dislikes. . . all change with age and experience. And it is just such a change in attitude that I have recently experienced. Science-fiction isn't just what it was to me a couple of years ago. . . even a year ago. I blush deeply whenever I read a letter I had the misfortune to have printed a year or so ago. . . Anyway, I am trying to live up to the New Era in sci, as reflected in Surge's new personality, the sharp rise in the sci outlook, and a growing public science-consciousness. I've noticed that a great many other fans seem to feel this way now. Change for the better. . . .

I too knocked Bergey. I still dislike slandering heroes on my sci magazines. But I'm gradually coming to the decision (dictated by the cover on the Fall TWS) that Bergey is one of my favorites.

Who kissed "Trantor?"

To the stories. . . Hamilton's lead novel was certainly in the New Tradition. Much more of this, and the die-hards who squawk about the Good Old Days will die of frustration. Well-written, as is expected from Hamilton; colorful; and full of that element which Hamilton himself, in "Meet The Author," calls "Wonder". To my mind, this element of Wonder—always with the capital "W"—is the basis of all science-fiction.

The two short stories are both fine, so much so that it is hard to rate them. I do believe that *LENNER'S FRIENDS* takes cards over *WHY'S TRAVELER'S TALK*, by a small margin, very small. Both are the "new era" type.

FRIENDS was fascinating in the concept of Twinning. An idea... definitely an idea.

This story, by the way, goes in a certain category along with one or two tales by fellows named Theodore Sturgeon, Chas. Davis, Anson MacDonald... Lewis Padgett has written one or two, and so have Cliff Simak and Robert Heinlein you know the stories I mean. And the Thing that those stories are talking about. The Unpleasant Thing.

The Thing that most people don't talk about because they can't visualize it; and those who can don't talk about it simply because they can't visualize it.

I'm glad, at least, that there's a literature based on the ability to wonder what happens when a plus b equals the square root of infinity instead of the commonplace c (How's that Serge, Campbell, and you other boys, for a definition of Science-fiction??)

I hail with pleasure the future of sci in *TWS* and *SS*. More Kuttner, Leinster, Company, eh? Plus a female who writes like Leigh Brackett and Sakl? That, Serge, I must read.

And will read—Brevator, Florida.

No comment on this one save for a rousing (and wondering) cheer.

SPITEFUL RESPIRE

by Tom Jewett

Dear Sir: I am ceasing my fan activities (reading *FANFICS*) so that I might comment on the Jan. 1st of good old *Startling*.

The *Star of Life* by our veteran world-saver Hamilton was first rate but not superior. I have read better ones. The idea of the story was fine, but the style of writing was not up to par even though the all-over effect was fine.

Venus Mines, Inc., by Zagat and Schachner should have been left on Venus. Look, these old stories just can't stack up with modern tales. *Stf* may not have grown much during the years but the writing now is usually better quality. *Stf*, these days, is thriving on a supplementary diet with the main portion being better characterization. In the old days, action was the main theme.

Friends was good, though I think the theme could have been more developed.

Traveler's Tale was very good. A "stuck" story if I ever read one. We want Whitley!

Before I turn to the cover, let's get one thing straight. Readers are funny people. It seems that we'd rather criticize than praise. It's natural to gripe at anything even slightly out of order. When the reader's department was inaugurated you really left yourself wide open.

Cover: Bergey is good, no matter how awful he is. Look at that guy jumping out after the gal. If he hasn't a Swedish expression on his pan I've never shaved! And looking at the girl I can understand his purposeful leer.

Interior pics: Marchionni was surprising because I'd be surprised if he could stay so bad. Stevens, page 72, was super to seventeen decimals. Moray, the just mediocre, is much better than the malicious Marchionni. Moray's page 86 better than his page 92.

Letters: I can't comment on Oliver's missive. Wonder why... I can't stand poetry of any kind, so Mater Rose composed for nothing... agree completely with him that an original offered for the best letter would bring in more response, and at the same time improve the quality. How 'bout it? Mass is a Mass-been.

Grimes' gmpa about the cover. Smarta, Millard, don't you appreciate contemporary art? You and your LAMS better take it on the LAMS, that is, Jim Kennedy, as you've probably read the Cap Phonocore note. I think you'll revise your opinion. Veronica, Veronica, where art thou? John Cockcroft couldn't be Clyde, Ohio.

righter in his praise of Kuttner. Henry is really a GREAT writer! Hear me, Henry? Bergey's was the usual pre-new-leaf baloney with his account of finding porridge in John's room.

The fanzine review was as usual competent, and I just can't wait until you critify mine—ETO George,

Somewhere, somehow, in the above maze of contradictions, we suppose Fra Jewett is trying to tell us something—but blessed if we know what! Besides, who's Veronica?

PANNED BY PARIS

by Robert K. Paris

Dear Sir: Just finished looking through the Jan. 47 issue, and I am sorry to say the rag (it used to be a mast) is on a slight but very definite downgrade (if indeed it can sink any lower!). I have seen covers as bad as this one, but they are few and far between. Hamilton's novel—where is *C'm Future*—seems to be fair, but only fair. The illustrations for this tale are very poor.

Venus Mines ranks highest in this issue, with the excellent "who drew it?"

The other blurbs were good filler, but little more. Have there been any Cap'n Future stories since *Outlaw World*?

Here's hoping those covers and contents improve—239 Spring Lake Street, Madisonville, Ky.

Yes, THE SOLAR INVASION, you web-footed he-goat. Why don't you learn the difference between a blurb and a story before you criticize either one? And your epistolary style (which we mercifully edited to spare our readers the impact of such quasi-literacy) is at least as erratic as Sneary's and nowhere near either as funny or as intelligently constructive as to content.

Now crawl back into your half of the puppet, Ex-Corporal Paris, and let us snore peacefully in ours.

PATTI SAVES THE DAY

by Patricia J. Bowling

Dear Sir: Just finished the January issue of *STARTLING STORIES* and had to sit down and drop you a line. Everything in the magazine was simply swell except the pictures. Please, I beg you, get someone to do your art work besides Marchionni. His illustrations are positively rank. Bergey goes a little wild on the covers but his work is good. Fred Ross Burgess does swell art work. I've seen some of it and it far surpasses Marchionni. Why not get him to send some of it in. I think you would approve. Burgess is very versatile. I've also read some of his stuff and it's good.

Serge, old pal, how about substituting a "poetry" section? You read some good verse dealing with the weird and fantastic and since I like poetry I would love to see *STARTLING STORIES* with such a department. Incidentally, you can scan which most of the poets whose poems have been printed in the latter section can't do. One of these fine days I shall get up the courage enough to submit one myself.

Thanks again, Serge, for a swell issue. I just wish *SS* and *TWS* were published weekly instead of bi-monthly. Be seeing you—Son Attonio 4, Terna.

Get your courage up, Patti, we're waiting with baited trochce—sounds like an undertaking shop, doesn't it? At that, more bad verse gets buried here than in any other *stf* mag. I think we can say that safely. As for Burgess, let him come up here and brace the red-headed and very able terror who reigns supreme in the art department. He, not your browbeaten editor, selects illustrators for all *SS* and *TWS* stories. So how about taking out a little of your ire on him for a change? He can take it—we hope.

NEOPHYTE by Bob Grenhart

Dear Sir: Here goes my first attempt at fan writing so don't feel so bad—if one can be worse! (I hope) I'm not going to gripe, or what have you, about the stories, authors, drawings, et al., for I don't consider my meager knowledge enough to warrant criticism of men who devote their time and energy to do that special thing.

In addition to that, I consider the Ether Vibrates not a place to gripe but a place where we can set our views, on ideas furnished to us by the authors through their stories, down on paper and thus let other fans in on our innermost thoughts. It is of no interest to me if Joe Kennedy, etc., like or dislike any individual story unless he can present some plausible reason for it.

As for the foolish controversy over Bergey! boy, that makes me laugh. One glance at his work is enough to show anyone who knows anything about the subject of art that he has something on the ball. Besides that—what kind of men are they who do not enjoy looking upon a lovely female, such as Bergey's usually are?

Well, what do you say, Sarge? Why not make a campaign for more deep thinking in the Ether Vibrates instead of the everlasting line of pro and con.

So'll tell next (if any) Sarge, I guess I'll set like an artist and draw this to a close—441 Andrews Avenue, Glenoiden, Pennsylvania.

What does he mean—"such as Bergey's usually are" . . . When the mighty Earle draws an unlovely female, we'll throw in the towel. And what does he mean about more deep thinking in this department? We were not aware that there was any. And what is deep thinking anyway—thinking under water like a humanoid ball-point fountain-pen—or what? Answer us please!

HUZZAHS FROM LIN by Lin Carter

Dear Sir: I did not think it possible for Ed Hamilton to equal or surpass his mighty "Prisoner of Mars" or "Three Planets" but he has done it with "The Star of Life."

In plot, setting, and characterization the story shines. Especially in characterization of Thaya. She reminded me, in some respects, of Weinbaum's Margaret of Urbis.

"Venus Mines, Inc." was one of the few yarns that really earned its place in the Hall of Fame. Excellent, except for the usual comic book-type of nine foot, green-skinned Martian villain.

The other two shorts were fair. "Friends" being best.

Now to The Ether Wobblers: Chad Oliver, as usual led the parade with a swell letter. You and I agree on Marchionni Chad. Tom Pace had some excellent views on Merritt and Kutner, which I will discuss later. An excellent poem by (Miss) Lee Budoff and stuff by Grimes and Sneyers were (or is it was?) quite readable. You can pay me later, boys.

Shades of Buchanano! So Ray Hays doesn't like guys who criticize stuff, huh? According to him, if a ran doesn't like your stories he shouldn't read the stuff. . . Well, pal, if you don't like the letters you don't have to read them either.

Nuff said.

Now about Pace and Kutner. I admit that Hank Kutner is good . . . good—he's excellent! . . . but I don't think he can equal Abe Merritt. By sheer poetic beauty, tremendous vocabulary, magnificent characterization and plots, Merritt has outwritten all other modern fantasy authors. He and Stapledon, Lovecraft, Burroughs, Taine and a few others, are generally called the Immortals of Scientifantasy.

I do not think Hank's work can compare with theirs. However, there are lesser Immortals like

Van Vogt, Hamilton, Heinlein, Brackett and Bond with whom his work is definitely comparable. Let's have more of his work.

Three rousing hurrahs for you, Sarge, on your defense of Bergey. It's become more or less conventional to yell about the covers, but Bergey does do good work. Coloring, figures etc. the only thing I don't like is his lack of originality. Screaming, dantes and brawny heroes in red football suits. He seems to have gotten away from the Bems at last. Good. Nasty die Bems—ugh!—865—20th Ave. So., St. Petersburg 8, Florida.

Remember, Lin, we like BEMS—in fact, we wonder a little about people who don't—like those unutterably inhibited folk who do not enjoy bad puns!

ONE FOR THE BOOK—THE TEXT BOOK!

by Marion Eleanor Zimmer

Dear Sir: I suppose it is too late now to get in a word about the summer issue—but I would like to get it in anyway. For that was my first issue of STARTLING STORIES—and now I'm a confirmed reader.

To begin—THE DARK WORLD was the best fantasy I have ever read and I certainly wish it could be published in book form to reach the millions who have a stupid and bigheaded prejudice against fiction magazines—and also I could have it in a more permanent form. My eye is already half-blinded to death as I imagine I have read it at least twelve times!

Just to prove how much I liked it—well, I attend State Teacher's College and you can imagine what a reception STY would find among the "bigheaded" people I mentioned above. Yet I brought up THE DARK WORLD in my English Literature class as an example of one of the best novels I've ever read. And the Professor had read it too!

As for the rest of the magazine, I like ETHERGRAMS and the review of Fandango. I also liked the Captain Future Story in the fall issue. When I read the advance review I was afraid it would be a childish comic-strip affair. But—surprise! It was a really swell story, enough to put up to THE DARK WORLD—but then, what could be?

I bought the January issue tonight and as soon as I finish this letter am going to sit down and read STAR OF LIFE. It looks very good. Orchids again on THE DARK WORLD and let's see it in book form! I predict it would be a best seller—RFD No. 1, East Greenwich, New York.

Well, heck, Marion, what did the Litt Teacher think of THE DARK WORLD? To say nothing of what you thought of THE STAR OF LIFE, THE LAWS OF CHANCE and LANDS OF THE EARTHQUAKE? Please let us know, won't you?

Incidentally, CALL HIM DEMON, the Keith Hammond novelet in the Fall, 1946, issue of our companion magazine, THRILLING WONDER STORIES, seemed to us and to most of our more discerning readers, very close to a fantasy classic. If you can get hold of a copy, we'd appreciate your views on that one too. At any rate, write us again, if only to line up with the others swinging three bats.

WE GUESSED IT ALREADY

by Edwin Drogin (age 14 in case you'd like to know)

Dear Sir: At Lissy Vanderhooft's lightly squeezed into the alcock she tenderly called, "Throckmorton,

you little woman, where are you?" Instantly our hero appeared. Striding up to her he crooned, "Here I am, Larry wovey. I was taking my vitamin pill when you called. They're awfully hard to get down."

How's that for the beginning of a story. We should have humorous ones once in a while and... aaaaah, what's that? Oh, the cover of S.S. had me scared for a moment. Oh well, it's better than last month's. I don't remember any scene from Star of Life that looked like that.

Now I will take out my handy pocket microscope and read The Ether Vibrations. Him looks like Dark World received quite an ovation. Personally I thought it was a little too long.

Here are my criticisms of the Jan. ish

1. Star of Life—excellent as all your first stories are.
2. Venus Mimes, Incorporated—up to par.
3. Friends—enjoyed it.
4. Travelers Tale—poor.

Here dear old Larry is a poem to keep you busy.

I am deep down in dark despair.

Those Bens are getting on my hair,

And dear sweet Bergey should go sit on a tack.

I bet he hasn't the intelligence to answer back.

So good old Larry will do it for him.

And let old Bergey's conscience gnaw him.

P. S. I think I better give up writing poems huh —

1974—80th Street, Brooklyn 4, New York

While we thank you, Edwin, for writing that—or—letter, we really think in poem-writing you could do better!

MIXED GRILL

by Wilkie Conner

Dear Sir: I am going to try to collect my wits and spray a few words around anent (I hope "anent" means what I think it means) the January Startling Stories.

The new policy seems to be in full swing in the letter section, and very much for the better, too. I especially enjoy your answers to questions put by readers. That is something all mags should do. It at least shows appreciation of readers' efforts to learn more about the inside workings of a magazine.

Most of us know very little about the mechanics of putting a magazine together so that it will make money as well as please a large number of readers and advertisers. Therefore, those little "back-stage" notes are more than welcome!

I don't care how the covers or interiors look in a magazine—nor who draws them. But if a majority of the readers seem to dislike Bergey as a cover man, then why not replace him?

It's surprising how many people are just waking to Kuttner's extraordinary talents. I, for one, recognized his greatness "way back in '41." As your back issue files of S.S. and TWS will show in my letters of praise. Hank can really show the ink.

I have refrained from criticizing the fiction in this issue because I feel that the other fans will kick the poor authors about enough without any added henc-a-bac from yours truly. Some stories are finding print in all mags that should be confined to the waste-paper collections, but why kick a yarn AFTER it is in print? The next story from the same guy might be a classic.

But the chances of that story being published would be slim if the editor thought that here, too, was a target for reader ammunition. Right? The only person who has a real right to condemn a yarn is the editor—and sometimes one would think even editors hate to exercise that right. (Personally, all I ever got was rejection slips. Maybe the office boy couldn't write...)

On the whole S.S. is "way out front in the field, now. I believe it will remain there.—Bar No. 2232, West Gastonia, North Carolina.

Thanks for the vote of confidence. But as for removing Bergey—horrors! The readers would have no one to gripe at. Besides, Bergey can and does paint what he is told to paint by certain mysterious astral powers and does it better than anyone else. We quite agree on Kuttner—next, please?

[Turn page]

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THAT BROWN MAN'S HERE AGAIN

by Guerry Campbell Brown

Dear Sir: Let's consider the January issue of *Starling Stories*. I've invented a system for rating stories. This is how it works. Stories are rated in symbols called nulls. A null is like this: "Now in rating a story you rate it like this, a story considered a 'classic' would be zero nulls. An excellent story would be one null. (*) A good one would be two or three nulls, and so on down the line. The lineup for this issue will be as follows:

Cover: *** (Berry can do much better than that.
No relation to the story.)
Novel: ** (Rather corny in spots, but pretty original plot. Interesting action.)
Neville: **** (Who picks the Hall of Fame Classics, anyway? Not the readers!)
Shorts: Friends--**

Travelers Tale--** (More shorts like this!)
The Ether Vibrates: * (Very good! Keep up the good work, Fellows!)
That about winds up this issue of Brown's Squak. Just one more thing. I'll admit that Raymond Hess has some good points. We need letters like his occasionally to balance the silliness. (Like the above.)—P. O. Box 1467 Delray Beach, Florida.

How true, Guerry. And you rate a whole basketful of Nulls for your missive—especially for your "brain-men-of-Venus" opening through which an austere blue pencil was drawn. Take it easy, there, will you?

OH-OH! MORE HAIR OF THE DOGGEREL

by John Koehler

Dear Sir: I am writing in to tell you my thoughts about the last ish. Following the footsteps of other fans, I am going to put in my two-bits worth.

The *Star of Life*, by Hamilton. He had some pretty good ideas about immortality. I would have rather read a CW though.

Venus Mines, Incorporated, by Zagat and Co. Pretty good, but Chad Oliver might think it was just a space-pirate story in disguise.

Friends, by Lehnert. Just average.
Travelers Tale, by Whitely. Marvelous! Amazing! Staggerous! Different!

Sin-Bloom-Bah! Sin-Bloom-Bah! Earle Bergey. Rahl Rahl! Rahl! Bergey finally got away from his three BEEM's, bug-eyed monster, blue-eyed maiden and big-eared midget. In the last ish, he only used the last two. The descriptions were good as usual.

Now I will write a story about the blue (Sarge, put down that blue pencil) Okay. Then I'll write about the green (Sarge, put that down. That's better.) Okay, then I'll write a poem.

All Bergey gets from all of youse, is a lot of booze, (not booze!)—
Even though he is persistent.
In drawing his BEEM's he is consistent.
With dimes a-sweeping
And monster's teeth gleaming;
But that's the way they're supposed to be.
If they weren't you'd be moaning. "Oh goshi Oh goshi!"

All an author gets is a great big cheer
While he types over a glass of beer.
As he frantically types,
While his plot he ripes,
He smiles with glee
As the fans write: "Whee!"
Space-pirates, oh boy!
They're my favorite joy."

Bergey sits in his studio, and, without rest
Draws his BEEM's at his very best.
So lets stand up and give a cheer,
For Bergey, instead of author dear.

By the way, ye old space-puppy, I guess I am one of your youngest readers. I am only 13 and I have been reading your mag for over two years.—1611 So Sprague, Tacoma, 6, Wash.

Don't try another of those until you are at least a year older and have LIVED, John!

COOKING WITH BRASS

by Michael Cook

Dear Sir: I have just finished reading the January ish of your magazine. It was the best in a long time.

And now the stories—The *Star of Life*—85 per cent. This is one of Hamilton's best. *Venus Mines Incorporated*—50 per cent. Please Sarge, get a decent 11 of P. story. If you do I'll be your friend for life. *Friends*—5000000 per cent. Ugh! Where do you get these things? Out of the war surplus? *Travelers Tale*—45 per cent. For once a good time-travel story. Hurrah! The cover was good for once. (Bergey, stop bulging your chest, you're going to burst your shirt buttons). The inside 100's rate as follows:

Pages 13, 15, 18—Very good, 85 per cent
Page 72—Not so hot, 60 per cent
Page 86—Ascock, 30 per cent
Page 93—Fair, 70 per cent
By the way the cover was 35 per cent.
The best letters were (1.) Tom Pace, (2.) Lin Carter, (3.) Millard Grimes.

Rise for a crime. This probably will seem silly but I raise my voice in earnest prayer—stop leaving the edges untrimmed!—37 Jameson Avenue, Toronto, Ontario.

What's the matter with our edges, huh? Does anyone else object to them as they are (there will be a short pause while a new editor is installed in place of this one, who was recently trampled to death by a stampede of untrimmed-edge-maddened fans.)

Honestly, though, we don't see why you care!

THEY GET YOUNGER AND YOUNGER

by Michael Wigodsky

Dear Sir: I'll start off by telling you that this is the first time I've ever written in a magazine and I'm only 11½ years old. That got that out of the way.

The cover on the January *Starling* was the usual Bergey—that is to say terrible.

Inside Illustrations:
13 terrible
15 not too bad
19 terrible
73, all right
86 good
93 wonderful

Letters: too much doggerel
The *Star of Life* almost as good as Knitter.
Venus Mines, Incorporated: I couldn't finish it. However, it was interesting to compare it with the new stories in the mag. (I'm again space pirates. I'm again quasi-human natives of other planets. I'm again everything except Knitter.)

Friends—Good
Travelers Tale. I nominate this story for the Hall of Fame story for 1956—104 Evans Ave., San Antonio, Texas.

At that, Michael, you write a more intelligent letter than a lot of your elders here present. So the column remains open to you, also to your expert typing. And your opinion on the stories was pretty close to that of the pros here in the office. Nice going, kid.

A DOWNEY RED

by John Van Couvering

Dear Sir: I was really surprised to see the Jan. '47

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on the cover, composition, and color (again, a peek at the cover rate him in the front rank of the topnotchers). And then you puts out a girl in a yellow-green (??) . . . uh . . . cloth, a guy in a bright red S.F.P.S. C.F. suit, (Society For the Prevention of Inter-Spatial Combustion and Fires) a blue glow and yellow lettering. Gads, wot a sense of color! Even if he didn't put the letters on it, Gads knows it's bad enough.

I really had a good time reading Chad's letter. Wow! I see Bergy has reverted to his technicolor don't gun again. Watchdog takes last place. Sissy was a little bit the damnest knock of misadventures in the right places. And how about that letter contest he proposed? Not a bad idea, 3rd goes to Lin Carter. He still had the worst poem in the lot tho.

The stories were even better than last time. The pigs were false.

Well, I guess I better close, but here's a parting blast. TELL WILLY ROSE AND RAYMOND F. BASS TO GO THROW THEIR SWEET LITTLE SELVES INTO A BUCKET OF SLUSH!! Nam's silly stab at sweet Snarry is stupid. The cracks aren't enough for him, he has to call them BEBs, yet. Better make it a slush barrel.

Here's for more like Sneary, JoKe, Chad and Gabe.
Now get off'n me, fellas—1242 Prairie, Lawrence,
Kansas.

We cannot but feel a certain sympathy for poor maligned Raymond Hass. After all, to him who Hass . . .

FRESH SMELL

by John R. Carroll

Dear Sir: Brother! (apologies to you) That I should ever use the appellation of 'Sarge' with a "Dear" in front of it! For two years I was whipped by one; then I was whipped into one; and, for three more years, I was whipped for being one.

For some obscure reason I enjoy your homely but harried humor (alliteration accidental). Many fan letters in *The Elber Völkchen* would go unread (and well they might) if it were not for the Sergeant's comments.

I read every piece of fantasy fiction that I can find but, fortunately, perhaps, my critical faculty extends in a wider direction than only towards the "One" stories in that some are better than others. I am alternately amazed and amused to find that various readers feel that this one "stinks" and that one "smells," etc. but then, I have a very literal imagination when it comes to the meanings of words.

The original purpose of this letter seems to have sidetracked itself: I intend only to compliment the Sarge on an unusually fresh approach to some very dreary work—60 Mason Terrace, Brookline, Massachusetts.

Try 'em for size in **THE READER SPEAKS IN THRILLING WONDER STORIES**. Same guys, same smells, same somewhat fetid chuckles. At any rate, thanks for the put on the back as well as for at least and at last another adult epistle.

HOW DOES HE OR SHE MEAN IT?

by Lynn H. Benham

Dear Sir: I don't see how he does it--Hamilton. I've just put aside the January issue of Stirling, and to say the least, the story pleased me highly. "Cold-shoulder" and "The Black Horse" are what I like. I never back a hack plot. Seems to have a way of coming thru with well written affair no matter how often he drags out the same old plot with small modifications--TWB elvis this time.

Speaking of girls, what manner of men (?) are those who bewail the appearance of the former upon the covers? The only objection I have is that none of the breed (of the covers) ever seem to appeal.

Tried to read the letters, but have a hard time doing that while holding my nose. The guy from South Bend seems to be just the opposite, takes everything that's shoved at him unceremoniously with no exceptions. Sounds like somebody that likes to have someone else do his censoring for him. (The South Shore Line station is only a block and a half from my domicile, Haan).

One thing that I can't see is this constant harping (by the readers) on the Meritts of fantasy. You truly has read many fantasy stories, Lovecraft and Merritt among them, but sees nothing to go into occultism over. At least, the fantasy offerings in SS seem to indicate a flexible policy in regard to types of stories put on for the reader.

Most of the poetry (?) sent in leaves me speechless. I say that, because profanity isn't used in named company and the music. But there's the exception to every rule: Miss Buddoff (odd name) really put in an amusing one this time, and who is Hilaire Belloc?

In closing, I'd like to know what happened to my old pal (?) George Khey. I sorta liked the little fellow, even if he didn't agree with my views; after all, if he did have my views exactly, three wouldn't be any place for him, and I'd get rather exasperated when he would grab onto my fence, cash my checks, drive my car (I'd like to see him do that; I'd be rather hard to do, seeing as how I don't have any), and other sundry items.—4144 Dorchester Ave., Chicago 37

From the final paragraph we gather that Lynn, this time out, is a male, not a female cognomen. As for Hilaire Belloc, outside of being for a couple of generations the literate spearhead of British Catholicism and a literary running mate of Max Beerbohm, G. K. Chesterton and all the other greats, he also authored the immortal—

"I shoot the hippopotamus with bullets made of platinum"

[Turn page]

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Because if I use leaden ones his hide is sure to flatten 'em." Which should be entirely sufficient unto the moment thereof.

HE SAW STAR

by James Evans

Dear Sir: I am not a scientific fan, and I seldom read the stuff because it is ordinarily unimaginative and very poorly written.

Nevertheless, a story appears now and then with actual interest and even some literary merit. Edmund Hamilton's "Star of Life" is certainly far above the average of tale. Its plot is really extraordinarily good. In its barest essentials it could stand up to any purely fantastic adventure that I have ever read.

It's a pity that an author who could conceive such an excellent outline of a yarn couldn't fill it in more intelligently. I suppose that Kirk Hammonds was intended to have only a limited screen, but Hamilton never makes that fact quite clear and often shows him as our OUR HERO. None of the others have any character at all, and its probably better that way. Another impediment is the af jargon and the conventionality of the war, escapes, etc.

An author less steeped in the traditions of af could have avoided much of the undesirable matter in the story, and a more literary-minded writer could have improved vastly the characterization and the dialogue. Still, most authors could never have written the story at all for lack of imagination, and I think Hamilton deserves enormous praise—yes, and eulogies galore for an exceedingly interesting novel. He has the infallible key to good story writing—Romance—4203 Duval St., Austin, Texas.

Thanks, James Evans, on behalf of Hamilton (Edmond). By Romance I take it you are speaking of the same Wonder that another correspondent mentioned above? We are rather inclined to think so. It is the magic of all great entertainment, the extra something the merely intelligent and hard-working artist can never attain. Whatever it appears, it is the Pied Piper's tin whistle—silver-toned to those caught in its spell.

Well, that winds us up again. We shall now go out and try to get unwound before we start singing like a top. So long for now!

—THE EDITOR.

COMING NEXT ISSUE!

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140

trying to solve the buried author puzzle (somebody found a space in the game and penciled over the total number of buried literateurs—did anyone say they should all be buried?). Tells Street apparently has been slandering the late Sarge, whoever he was, a basic libel which we missed entirely as it appeared. And Bob Gaulin's analysis of so-called "fantasy" music was shrewd most of the way. The letter section was excellent and Christensen's short story held up far better than most of its ilk. All in all, a nice job.

ROCKETS: 469 Duane Street, Glen Ellyn, Illinois. Editor, R. L. Farnsworth. Published quarterly. \$3.00 per year, three years \$10.00 (Does it make sense? No.)

Outside of the ridiculous subscription rate, this book is steadily on the upbeat. The new, smaller format makes for easier reading, the illustrations and articles are of much current interest and the editors have discarded the juice or orange peels as rocket fuel in favor of acid and ordure. We're still betting it will be atomic when space travel actually gets here. Also contains a picture of actor John Garfield in spectacles (He plays Vitamin Flintheart on the air in you-know-what) and is a long-time pal of your critic. Also one of our better performers, as is the magazine.

SCIENTIFICATIONIST: 18618 Cedar Grove, Detroit 5, Michigan. Editor, Henry Elmer Jr. Published bi-monthly. 10c per copy, three issues 25c.

A very good job, apart from a hideously hectoring cover. Gerry de la Ree uncovers and reviews a story that sounds intriguing and Red Rogers Rpley analysis is first class. So is everything else in the mag.

SHANGRI L'AFFAIRES: 6371 South Bixel Street, Los Angeles 14, California. Editor, Charles Burbee. Published every seven weeks. 10c per copy, 3 issues 25c.

Well up to snuff, with Tucker's hilarious description of Liebercher's fabulous post-Pacific picnic taking most of the play. After perusing it, with many snide chuckles and guffaws, we reminisced non-nostalgically over certain all fresco occasions in our own unhappy past and began to wonder how miserable you can get anyway. There must be a limit somewhere. Let's hope the Angelinos make this ludicrous event at least annual so that more write-ups can ensue.

STELLARITE: 4 Winship Avenue, San Anselmo, California. Editor, John Cockroft. Published irregularly. 10c per copy.

Quite a distinguished job, all in all, what with such pros as Ed Hamilton, E Hoffman Price and the like contributing. However, Editor Cockroft should be very sure he obtains permission for his reprints from copyright owners. Rag Rehm's artwork is—well, Rag Rehm's.

VAMPIRE: 84 Parker Avenue, Dover, New Jersey. Editor, Joe Kennedy. Published irregularly. 10c per copy or 12 issues for \$1.00.

Joe's mag hews to its own many line, despite a somewhat letter-day expose of the centaur by Ken Krueger. Lloyd Alpaugh Jr. takes less than a page to tell the history of science fiction—a feat Sam Moskowitz has thus far been unable to match. Lancy, Elmer, Tigrina, Weissel, Eber and others well known in fan circles, along with the editor, come forward with amusing or interesting contributions.

Well, kiddies, that's the A List. Now, unhappy as the prospect may appear, we shall swallow all editorial caste consciousness and

[Turn page]



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delve into the lesser brothers on the B List. Whether or not the clothespin compressing our nostrils is needful, here goes:

ATAVAN: 4 Winslip Avenue, San Anselmo, California. Editor, John Cockcroft. Published irregularly. No price. Modestly effect little zine in which Messers Cockcroft, Streiff and Bloch sound off in reasonably entertaining effect. If it weren't for a most deeply reproduced Behm cover, this might rate the A List.

FANEWS: 1445 Fourth Avenue South, Fargo, North Dakota. Editor, Walter Dunkelberger. 2c per sheet. 55 sheets \$1.00. Still far and away the best regular newspaper for fandom. Congratulations again, Dusk.

FANTASIA: 639 George Street, Clyde, Ohio. Published irregularly. Editor, Tom Jewett. No price listed. Well, as far as Jewett is concerned, it is one way of getting his own fiction printed. My, that man must simply love to write.

FANTASY REVIEW: 15 Shere Road, Ilford, Essex, Great Britain. Editor, Walter Gillings. Published bi-monthly. Annual subscription 2 shillings (12c to you, huh). Welcome announcement of a British fanzine. Some of you might want to climb aboard.

FANTASY-TIMES: 186-63 Northern Boulevard, Corona, New York. Editor, Will Bykora. Published weekly. 5c per copy, 6 issues 25c. Next to FANEWS the best news-zine extant.

FORLO KON: 4349 Baltimore Street, Los Angeles 41, California. Editor, Kenneth H. Bennett. Published irregularly. No price listed. Just about as amateurish as its invariable pricing.

THE GOLDEN GATE FUTARIAN: 2537 San Jose Avenue, Alameda, California. Editor, Roger Behm. Published (?) irregularly. No price listed. Whether we have the title correct or whether the real name of this unedifying item is WITHOUT GLUE will undoubtedly rate in years to come as the mystery of this issue of 88. So be it!

LUNACY: 1115 San Anselmo Avenue, San Anselmo, California. Editor, George Caldwell. Published bi-monthly. 5c per copy. Sophomoric little number in which the San Anselmo lads cut a few capers of local topical interest. Include us out!

LUNARITE WEEKLY: P.O. Box 524, Perry, New York. Editor J.A.K. Price unlimited. A very good looking magazine which apparently failed to survive to a second issue. Too bad.

THE MUTANT: 3248 Monterey, Detroit 6, Michigan. Editor, Ben Singer. Published irregularly. 10c per copy, 6 issues 25c. Poor printing and crude artwork keeps this Detroit zine down in the doldrums despite a high-powered lineup that includes Brazier, Elmer, Tigrina and Joe Kennedy. Spruce it up, Ben, and get this other hot little mag up where it belongs.

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THE NATIONAL FANTASY FAN (Nos. 7 & 8): 399 Williamsboro Street, Oxford, South Carolina. Editor, Andy Lyon. Published monthly. No price listed. Not overimpressive for a 'zine that terms itself somewhat grandiosely "official organ of the National Fantasy Fan Federation." It could take a lot of improvement, especially in the too-often eighth issue.

PSFS BULLETIN, 1366 East Columbus Avenue, Philadelphia 25, Pennsylvania. Editor, Robert A. Meade. Published bi-weekly. 25c for 8 issues. Well organized chapter on what gives with Philadelphia. The Quaker City is rapidly becoming Southern California's only serious rival for named activities.

PSF NEWS, 122 South 18th Street, Philadelphia 5, Pennsylvania. Editor, Allison Williams. Published monthly. 10c per copy & issue 50c. 12 issues \$1.00. More good stuff from Philly. We have a hunch this will run itself out of the B List and high up on the A List by the time the Philconvention rolls around later this year. Those boys and girls down there are really organized.

SCARAB, 115 Aycock, Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Editor, Fred Ross Burgess. Published monthly. 10c per copy, 3 issues 25c, 12 issues \$1.00. Our copy, alas, was otherwise illegible as we can bestow but a dubious blessing. Please, fellows, send us mags we can read!

And that is that. Not too bad, but scarcely sensational (outside of Dunk and his super-colossal SCRAPBOOK. Keep 'em coming and we'll all do the best our conscience will allow us for them. Adios now.

—THE EDITOR.

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